

**“GOD ACTS FROM THE LAWS OF HIS NATURE ALONE”:**

**FROM THE *NIHIL EX NIHILO* AXIOM TO CAUSATION AS EXPRESSION IN  
SPINOZA’S METAPHYSICS**

by

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Francesca di Poppa, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2006

Abstract: One of the most important concepts in Spinoza’s metaphysics is that of causation. Much of the extensive scholarship on Spinoza, however, either takes causation for granted, or ascribes to Spinoza a model of causation that, for one reason or another, fails to account for specific instances of causation—such as the concept of cause of itself (*causa sui*).

This work will offer a new interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of causation. Starting from the “nothing comes from nothing” axiom and its consequences, the containment principle and the similarity principle (basically, the idea that what is in the effect must have been contained in the cause, and that the cause and the effect must have something in common) I will argue that Spinoza adopts what I call the expression-containment model of causation, a model that describes all causal interactions at the vertical and horizontal level (including *causa sui*, or self-cause). The model adopts the core notion of Neoplatonic emanationism, i.e. the idea that the effect is a necessary outpouring of the cause; however, Spinoza famously rejects transcendence and the possibility of created substances. God, the First Cause, causes immanently: everything that is caused is caused in God, as a mode of God.

Starting from a discussions of the problems that Spinoza found in Cartesian philosophy, and of the Scholastic and Jewish positions on horizontal and vertical causation, my dissertation will follow the development of Spinoza’s model of causation from his earliest work to his more mature *Ethics*. My work will also examine the relationship between Spinoza’s elaboration of monism, the development of his model of causation, and his novel concept of essence (which for Spinoza coincides with a thing’s causal power).

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## INTRODUCTION

Spinoza's monism, the notion that there is only one substance, has been considered, especially but not exclusively by his contemporaries, a puzzling feature of his philosophy. A few modern interpreters went so far as to argue that Spinoza's real modernity lies in the fact that he dispenses with the ancient concept of substance (contrary to Descartes) and that the parts of *Ethics* that matter most to the goals of the work (ethical and political philosophy relevant to human happiness) easily dispense with a theory of substance and monism.

On the other hand, Jonathan Israel, in his *Radical Enlightenment*, writes:

For even the last, the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century phase in the formation of the Radical Enlightenment, the probing towards the concept of evolution from inert matter and of higher from lower forms of life, was derived, as its foremost champion Diderot stressed, directly from the doctrine that motion is inherent in matter, a concept generally regarded with horror and universally acknowledged in Enlightenment Europe as quintessentially Spinozist. The claim that Nature is self-moving and creates itself became indeed the trademark of the *Spinosistes*. Thus the origins of the evolutionary thesis seemingly reinforces Einstein's proposition that the modern scientist who rejects divine Providence and a God that governs the destinies of man, while accepting the 'orderly harmony of what exists,' the

intelligibility of an imminent universe based on principles of mathematical rationality, in effect believes in Spinoza's God.<sup>1</sup>

Israel rightly remarks that the most radical element of Spinoza's thought is dispensing with transcendence while at the same time offering a concept of matter as active that overcomes the limits of the inert matter of Cartesian metaphysics, thus opening the door to materialistic evolutionism (which was absent from Spinoza's own view).

Spinoza's metaphysics was based on a self-causing *Deus sive Natura*, whose power is manifested deterministically in each and every single fact of nature, and in each and every representation of such fact (idea), as power of producing and power of thinking. Any interpretation of Spinoza's thought, including political thought, that overlooks this metaphysical framework constitutes an unacceptable distortion not only of the letter of Spinoza's texts, but of the spirit of the kind of intellectual revolution that Spinoza wished to bring about, albeit *caute*<sup>2</sup>. Spinoza did not endorse democracy and freedom of expression simply because of their political appeal (particularly for a freethinker such as himself); he believed that democracy and freedom of expression were political ideals that were deeply rooted in the metaphysics of things, including human nature.

In rejecting transcendence, indeterminism, and related doctrines, such as personal immortality, Spinoza also rejected a certain way of doing philosophy. For him, philosophers such as Descartes (whom he deeply admired, and against whom he measured himself all his life) were guilty of constructing a system that would follow the mathematical method of demonstrations

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<sup>1</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Cautiously. *Caute* was Spinoza's motto.



after self-evident principles, but only to the extent that it would not conflict with revelation. Spinoza considered the Scriptures a work aimed at imposing moral rules to an ignorant and rebellious population, not a repository of theological and philosophical wisdom. If the Scriptures contain any philosophical truth at all, such truth could not conflict with the ones achievable by following one's own reason. He made all this very clear, to his own detriment, in *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Tied to the rejection of transcendence is a univocal understanding of causation and substance. Spinoza accepted the containment model of causation, because it was based on the universally accepted axiom "*Nihil ex nihilo*." If the effect were not previously contained in the cause, it would come out of nothing, which is absurd. The axiom and the containment model were endorsed by a long line of philosophers, including Descartes; however, in their philosophies, divine transcendence demanded that, containment principle notwithstanding, there be incommensurability between the nature and causality of God and the nature and causality of created substances. Because of this incommensurability, because of the utter dependence of things and their powers on God, philosophers ended up accepting the equivocal use of the terms "substance" and "causation." Descartes explicitly stated the former, and the latter can easily be derived from his works. In my discussion, I will label the conflict between God's transcendence and the axiom of causation the "keeping the distance" problem. God supposedly contained everything that he created, but at the same time must be incommensurably, incomprehensibly different from what he supposedly contained and created; God must *keep his distance* from the world. The "keeping the distance" problem was articulated in different ways in different authors, but we can identify common themes in the few authors I will discuss at some length (Descartes, Suárez, Herrera).

Spinoza's dissatisfaction with the previous systems should not prevent one from seeing how indebted he was to the authors he dismissed. It is often noticed how he dismisses almost all of the previous philosophical traditions (from Aristotelian Scholastic metaphysics to Jewish philosophers). Spinoza believed that he had achieved superior coherency because he did draw the consequences of his first principles without being constrained by religious dogmas. Given an understanding of substance that (he believed) any philosopher should agree on, it follows that there can be only one substance. Given an understanding of causation that anyone should agree on, unless misguided by religion, it follows that God and nature are one, that there is no freedom except for God's self-determination, and that all that we are is expressions of divine nature, which is power and activity.

The first casualties of Spinoza's method are a certain concept of a personal God and the doctrines of creation and personal immortality. Consistently and uncompromisingly enforcing a traditional concept of substance (based on complete, unconditional ontological independence) and a traditional principle of causation (the containment principle, or the idea that nothing can be in the effect unless it was contained in the cause), Spinoza dispenses early on with the very possibility of created substances, of contingency, and of non-immanent causation. Whatever a substance causes must stay in the substance itself: there can be only a modal distinction between a substance and its effects.

In order to carry out his ambitious project, Spinoza needed a 'remodeling' of the concept of causation. While he kept the traditional term "efficient cause" (as we will see, Suárez before him had argued exhaustively that the efficient cause is the only one which is cause proper), Spinoza had to introduce some radical innovations, in order to have a serviceable *univocal* concept of causation. And yet, for causation as well as for substance, Spinoza believed he was

doing nothing more than using the terms appropriately, in the only way in which anyone paying attention to the meaning of “causation,” as well as to the containment principle, would do. This involves disposing of such nonsense (for Spinoza) as eminent causation; but it also involves a radical change from the traditional concept of the relationship between the essence of a thing and its causal powers. This change closes the ontological gap, posed since Aristotle, between a thing’s essence and its causal powers, considered as accidents.

From his supposedly earliest work, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza felt that human happiness was dependent on man’s correct understanding of his metaphysical place. Spinoza had many polemic targets, but to some extent they can be reduced to two ideas and their ramifications: transcendence and indeterminism. In particular, Spinoza saw the endorsement of transcendence as the ‘original sin,’ which would prevent a thinker from consistently accepting the fact that man is not a ‘kingdom within a kingdom,’ but a cog in an infinite, divine mechanism. Man is a cog capable of magnificent achievements as well as of bottomless depravity; a cog whose aspirations to eternity are justified, as long as he or she embraces the true philosophy and abandons the delusion of a personal God who would arbitrarily dispense joy and sorrow.

This work will follow the path from Spinoza’s Cartesian inspiration to the culmination of his monistic metaphysics. It will show that Spinoza carefully analyzed Cartesian philosophy for its mistakes and its insights, to conclude that it could be brought closer to the truth if its fundamental mistakes were corrected. Without claiming to offer an exhaustive history of philosophical influences on Spinoza, I will discuss Suárez as the paradigm of Scholastic philosophy (though his influence on Spinoza was probably indirect), and Herrera, a source certainly known to Spinoza, as the unique figure who tried to join several philosophical

traditions (including Scholasticism and Neoplatonism) with the Jewish Kabbalah, in the attempts to make philosophical sense of Jewish mysticism, and in the attempt (as I will show) to solve the “keeping the distance” problem.

The ultimate goal of my work, however, is to offer an interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of causation. I want to answer the question “What does Spinoza mean when he says that X causes Y?” I will take seriously two important claims that Spinoza made: that God is *causa sui*, and that God is *causa sui* in the same sense in which he is the cause of each and every of his modes. Many interpreters, including recent ones, claim that the first statement is to be interpreted in a negative way: God is self-caused in the sense that nothing exists outside of it that can prevent it from existing. This is certainly part of the story. However, it fails to account for how the second of Spinoza’s causal claims is to be interpreted. Surely we will not go very far explaining how God causes modes by saying “God causes mode X in the sense that there is nothing outside of God that can prevent mode X from existing”?

I will argue that Spinoza’s concept of causation is based on a strong interpretation of the containment principle, and on the elaboration of the concept of expression. The effect of something is an expression of its essence; which, Spinoza explicitly stated, is power. Things *are* what they do. Powers are not accidents superimposed on essences, or emanating from them, as in the Scholastic tradition (including scholars contemporary to Spinoza). This model of causation is the same for God and for finite things. The model explains in which sense God’s attributes are express-*ings* of his power, or basic ways of power (“powers of”), and, with the addition of the principle of plenitude, offers a positive account of the expression *causa sui*: God is because his essence is power. The same way, God causes his infinite and finite modes because his essence as power is expressed through basic ways (the attributes) and in *determined*, or conditioned ways. It

is because causation is understood as expression of one's essence that it makes sense to say that, because God's essence *contains* existence, God is self-caused. It is because God is self-determined, not undetermined (as in voluntaristic views of God), that from his essence alone follow infinite things in infinite (conditioned) ways.

The first chapters of this work will give some background. I will begin with a summary of the problems that a reader such as Spinoza would find in Cartesian metaphysics. The second chapter consists in a survey of Spinoza's only work that was published in his name before his death, the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. It will show the main problems that Spinoza saw in Cartesian metaphysics, and how he drew conclusions from Cartesian assumptions that Descartes would have rejected on the notions of substance, causation and freedom.

My third chapter will show how the "keeping the distance" problem plagues the Scholastic tradition, by exploring Francisco Suárez's *Metaphysical Disputations*. There is no doubt that Spinoza knew Suárez at least indirectly, through his readings of Franco Burgersdijk, Adriaan Heereboord and Keckerman, as well as Abraham Cohen Herrera (who did take plenty of liberties with the philosophers he quoted). My overview of Suárez's work (far from exhaustive) will focus on how, in denying that nothing can have being or causal activity but for the active and continuing concurrence of God, Suárez finds it difficult to convincingly argue for the kind of authentic causal action that is needed for the moral theories of free will and moral responsibility.

In this chapter I will also introduce the interesting figure of Abraham Cohen Herrera, author of *Gate of Heaven*, who, I believe, inspired Spinoza's idea of expression. Herrera offered an interesting twist on the emanationist tradition, and, while his philosophy is overall inconsistent (I will not spend any time trying to solve his problems), there are passages that

could have inspired Spinoza's interpretation of the relationship between God and his attributes, and the idea that causation is simply an 'emanation' of essence as power.

In the fourth chapter, I will offer an analysis of Spinoza's pre-*Ethics* works: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the *Short Treatise*. *Short Treatise* is the first sketch of Spinoza's metaphysics. Unfortunately, we have no previous drafts, or correspondence by Spinoza, that could help us understanding better how he developed his ideas. It is evident that *Short Treatise* contains the pillars of the system that will be elaborated in *Ethics*. The part most relevant to my work is the discussion of God's nature and God's relationship to the world. In this part I will take a stance against an interpretation that was originally suggested by Gueroult, and has resurfaced recently (Saccaro Battisti, 2004), according to which at this stage Spinoza believed that God was something above and beyond the whole of the infinite substance/attributes. I will show that a careful reading of the text does not justify the interpretation, but at the most points to ambiguities, perfectly understandable in a work that was never revised for publication.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I will offer my interpretation, putting together threads already elaborated in the discussion of *Short Treatise* with an analysis of *Ethics*. The discussion will show that Spinoza's model of causation, which I call the containment/expression model, follows from Spinoza's endorsement of a very strong form of the containment principle and of a form of emanationism based on the principle of plenitude, which involves determinism. Because essence is nothing but power, and because power is expressed only in ways determined by the very nature of the cause, the effect is an expression of its cause. Effects can only be modally distinct from their cause. While they are not emanations in the Plotinian sense, they have much in common with those, in their being a necessary 'output' of their power.

The interpretation I suggest has several advantages over other discussion of Spinoza's causation. In particular, the model is consistent with Spinoza's commitment to univocity, and, more importantly, it allows me to explain in what sense Spinoza can say that God is *causa sui* in the same sense that he is cause of everything else. Moreover, it is consistent with Spinoza's monism based on the containment principle, or the notion that the effect can never be really distinct from the cause, but can only be modally distinct. In other words, in Spinoza's metaphysical picture, the causal relata are never distinct "things." I will also explain how Spinoza's philosophy is better understood in terms of an ontology based on activities, or in today's terms *processes*, rather than on an ontology based on "things."

Spinoza was very interested in the mechanical philosophy, though his thought can in no way be construed as mechanistic. He wanted his model of causation to find its place in scientific discussions. Unfortunately, *Ethics* says very little about the 'hard sciences': while plenty of it is devoted to psychology, very little of it is devoted to mechanics. Spinoza, however, briefly discussed the principles of motion, in a few lemmas and axioms in E II. I will apply my model of causation to this discussion and show that the containment/expression model is applicable to Spinoza's physical discussion, as well as to his treatment of ideas. This is another advantage that my model has over the mechanical/transference model (which does not apply to ideas) and the inference model (which does not work very well for matter). Both models fail to account for Spinoza's commitment to a metaphysics of power and activity.

Most of the quotes in this work are from English translation (Latin provided when relevant). The exceptions are my translations of parts of Suarez' *Disputationes Metaphysicae* not available in English. For Spinoza's works, I used Edwin Curley's 1984 edition of *Ethics, Short Treatise, Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* and *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. For

Spinoza's correspondence, I used Samuel Shirley's 1995 translation. Translations of Descartes are from the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch edition (CSM). Page numbers in footnotes refer to these editions.

While I honestly believe that my discussion offers a significant contribution towards making sense of an extremely obscure issue, I would have never been able to come to an understanding of Spinoza if I had not had access to extensive literature and to highly stimulating discussions. To the scholars who contributed to my understanding of Spinoza and the Cartesian and Scholastic traditions, through their writing or conversation, I am deeply indebted, in particular to Ted McGuire, with whom I shared so many stimulating chats by just popping by his office. Thanks Ted for always making time for me. Many thanks are also due to Yves Citton, Dennis Looney and Steve Engstrom for feedback and support.

To Peter Machamer, dissertation advisor, I owe so much more than intellectual contribution. Peter and his wonderful wife Barbara offered plenty of moral support, wonderful dinners, and even hosted my wedding. I wish I were able to express my gratitude for their friendship without sounding banal, but I cannot.

To my family, which has been cheering from far, far away: this moment is for you. It may not be much, but you did make it possible. Mamma, babbo, Adriano, Federica, Ginevra and Leonardo: Thanks.

To Peter Muhlberger, my husband: I keep thinking you are too good to be true. But then I think about your appalling taste in movies and your definition of 'wearable clothes', and realize I could not have made you up, so you must be for real. Thanks for putting up with me. I do not know how you do it, but I am grateful.



## 1.0 DESCARTES' METAPHYSICS: AN OVERVIEW

Descartes' philosophy was the mainstream philosophy during mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. It was the philosophy that every thinker had to compare himself, or compete, with. By the time Spinoza began his activity as a philosopher (1650s), debates on whether Cartesianism was good or bad had become often aggressively personal. Anyone who wanted to do philosophy had to take a stance on Cartesianism.

From his earliest work, and through all his life, Descartes searched for systematicity: a sound set of metaphysical principles that would allow knowledge of every aspect of the world. Descartes famously described such a system in his tree metaphor in his Letter to Father Picot, published in the French edition of *The Principles of Philosophy* (1647). From *Discourse on Method* (1638) on, Descartes endorsed a philosophical system based on the notion that there cannot be knowledge unless guaranteed by the belief in a non-deceiving God. Such belief would constitute the foundation of a system of knowledge which, while not promising to deliver the complete truth about everything, guarantees to preserve from error (assuming the principles of sound reasoning were respected). While important aspects of Cartesian thought were modified through his life, this basic belief was held consistently.

Henry Oldenburg, in one of his first letter to Spinoza, asked him what were Descartes' and Bacon's biggest philosophical mistakes. In Ep. 2, answering the question, Spinoza wrote that both Descartes and Bacon

have gone far astray from knowledge of the first cause of all things.  
Secondly, they have failed to understand the true nature of the human mind.  
Thirdly, they have never grasped the true cause of error<sup>3</sup>.

For Spinoza, the first and foremost Cartesian error was a misunderstanding of the very foundation of a philosophical system. I will show that, in Spinoza's reading, Descartes' fundamental mistake was the way he conceptualized the "first cause," both in terms of understanding causation, and in terms of understanding the nature of the first cause (God). These misunderstandings brought about Descartes' erroneous interpretation of the nature of the human mind, his unintelligible account of the mind/body union, and his failure to correctly identify the nature of falsehood and error. Ultimately, avoiding Descartes' mistakes requires a reworking of the concepts of substance and causation.

Though the term "substance" refers to something existing independently, Descartes thought that it could be used for created substances, whose existence is independent only with respect to other created substances and modes. In other words, though created substances are utterly dependent, for their existence, on God's creation and conservation, they do not depend on anything else. However, Descartes accepted that the term substance can be used *equivocally*, i.e. with different meanings when it is used referring to God or to creatures:

By *substance*, we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way *as to depend on no other thing for its existence*. And there is only one substance, which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. Hence the term 'substance' does not

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<sup>3</sup> Ep.2, 62. The letter was presumably written in September 1661.

apply *univocally*, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things: that is, there is no intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creature.<sup>4</sup>

Of created things and properties, those that immediately depend on something besides God to exist are called *modes*. Properties such as shape or weight cannot exist unless there is a created substance having that shape or weight. Things such as a belief or a wish cannot exist unless there is a created substance having that belief or that wish. Descartes argued that there are two kinds of created substances: one whose principal attribute is thought, and one whose principal attribute is extension. In *Principles*, I, 53, Descartes simply stated (i.e., offered no argument<sup>5</sup>) that substances have only one principal attribute, on which any other property depends, conceptually and ontologically.

Modes, attributes and properties are defined as follows:

By mode, as used above, we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by attribute or quality. But we employ the term mode when we are thinking of a substance *as being affected or modified*; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as substance of such and such a kind, we use the term quality; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of *what is a substance*, we use the term attribute. Hence we do not, strictly

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<sup>4</sup> *Principles*, I, 52; CSM, II, 210; Descartes' italics.

<sup>5</sup> At the end of Meditation II, Descartes offered his wax argument to show that extension is the most fundamental property of bodies, but he does not argue against substances possibly having more than one fundamental attribute.

speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since, in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible.<sup>6</sup>

So, the attributes of extension and thought are what defines extended and thinking substances as such, and they can be separated from substance only through a “distinction of reason” (*Principles* I, 62).

For Descartes, the fact that extension and thought can be clearly and distinctly conceived one without the other is evidence that they are attributes of different substances:

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God *so as to correspond exactly to my understanding of it*. Hence, the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgment that the two things are distinct... But... on one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly it is certain that I<sup>7</sup> am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Principles*, 1, 56; CSM I, 211.

<sup>7</sup> “... That is, my soul, by which I am what I am” (added in the French version).

<sup>8</sup> Meditation VI, CSM II, 54.

But now I must explain how the mere fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one substance apart from the other is enough to make me certain that one excludes the other. The answer is that the notion of a substance is just this—that it can exist by itself, that is, without the aid of any other substance. And there is no one who has ever perceived two substances by means of two different concepts without judging that they are really distinct.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to the “God is no deceiver” epistemic principle, conceptual independence is an infallible clue of ontological independence. If the concepts of body and soul do not need each other to be clearly and distinctly conceived, then the respective substances do not need each other to exist. As a consequence, for example, Descartes disputes Mersenne’s materialism<sup>10</sup>. Against his objector Mersenne, Descartes pointed out that, if we do not accept conceptual (clear and distinct) distinction as a criterion for real distinction, then we have no criterion left to find out if two things are distinct substances or not.

Error is explained by Descartes through a distinction between intellect and will: while the former is finite, the latter can go beyond it, thus driving the mind to assent to things that have not been conceived “clearly and distinctly.” Basically, as long as we stick to what is “clearly and distinctly” perceived by the eye of the attentive mind, we are in good epistemic shape. This, of course, does not imply that we can have clear and distinct ideas of everything that there is to

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<sup>9</sup> Fourth Set of Replies; CSM II, 159.

<sup>10</sup> The problem of the ontological status of the mind-body union is not relevant to my purposes, and therefore will not be discussed.

know: God took care that we have the kind of knowledge that we need for the sake of our welfare in this world (and in the next).

Descartes' philosophy offers a number of interesting problems, both interpretative (what did Descartes *really* mean?) and philosophical. It is not my intention here to discuss any of these in any real depth, or to solve them. The scope of this Cartesian journey is to have a deeper look at the problems that Spinoza, or in general a reader with a sharp philosophical mind, would have found more troubling, in order to see in which way finding a solution to these problems 'steered' Spinoza's thought. I will show that these problem have a common ground.

The relevant Cartesian problems can be grouped, for the sake of this inquiry, in four groups: the nature of extension; the nature of thought and representation; the problem of particulars; and the most relevant for my purposes, the problem of causation.

After, I will examine what constraints on Descartes' metaphysics explain the problematic positions. In particular, I will discuss (briefly) the main issues in the light of what I called the 'keeping the distance' problem, i.e. the conflict between the need to keep God incommensurably distant from created things, and at the same time to make these utterly dependent, ontologically and causally, from God. Why Spinoza decided that he would ignore these constraints, and why he thought that his philosophy did not suffer from the same ailments is for a later part of this work.

## **1.1 THE NATURE OF EXTENSION**

The nature of causal interaction between bodies is still an object of dispute among interpreters, whose positions range from seeing Descartes as a full-fledged mechanist to reading him as a

quasi-occasionalist. The reason lies in Descartes' definition of matter and motion, which rules out any activity inherent to matter:

A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance...<sup>11</sup>

This definition shows that nothing in extension involves anything that can cause motion. Extension constitutes the *nature* of bodies; i.e., extension explains what bodies are and what they can (or cannot) do. Everything that bodies can do by themselves must be explained through extension;<sup>12</sup> and nothing in the Cartesian concept of extension involves activity, or force, or anything that may cause motion.

Here is the definition of motion:

If... we consider what should be understood by 'motion' not in common usage but in accordance with the truth of the matter, and if our aim is to assign a determinate nature to it, we may say that motion is the transfer of one piece of matter, or one body, from the vicinity of the other bodies which are in immediate contact with it, and which are regarded as being at rest, to the vicinity of other bodies. By 'one body' or 'one piece of matter' I mean whatever is transferred at a

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<sup>11</sup> *Principles*, 1, 52; CSM I, 210. In earlier works, such as *Le Monde*, Descartes did ascribe some form of activity to matter.

<sup>12</sup> Again, Descartes did not offer any explanation for why a substance's nature is expressed by only one fundamental property.

given time, though this may in fact consist of many parts which have different motions relative to each other. And I say ‘the transfer,’ as opposed to the force or action which brings about the transfer, to show that motion is always in the moving body as opposed to the body that brings about the movement. ... And I want to make clear that the motion of something that moves is, like the lack of motion of something that is at rest, a mere mode of that thing, and not in itself a subsistent thing...<sup>13</sup>

So, if matter is mere extension, and is capable of being in motion, what brings about motion? In a letter to More, Descartes specified

I agree that ‘if matter is left to itself and receives no impulse from anywhere’ it will remain entirely still. But it receives an impulse from God, who preserves the same amount of motion or transfer in it as he placed in it at the beginning.<sup>14</sup>

So, matter is inert, and God gives and conserves motion, regulating transfers of motion from a body to another according to laws of nature described in part 2 of *Principles*. But what is the nature of these transfers? It had been observed (by More as well, in his letter to Descartes) that, if motion is a mode, it cannot exist separately of bodies, and therefore it cannot ‘jump’ from a body to another. In Descartes’ polemics against real qualities, he accused the Scholastics of confusing modes and substances, by claiming that qualities could exist independently of their

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<sup>13</sup> *Principles* 2, 25; CSM I, 233.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to More, Aug 1649; CSM III, 381



substances. If Descartes claimed that modes ‘jump’ between bodies, he would be guilty of the same mistake: depicting a mode that has an existence independent of its substance.

And indeed Descartes rejected explicitly this position in another passage of the 1649 letter to More quoted above:

You observe correctly that ‘motion being a mode of body, cannot pass from one body to another.’ But this is not what I wrote: indeed I think that motion, considered as such a mode, continually changes. For there is one mode in the first point of a body A in that which is separated from the first point of a body B; and another mode in that it is separated from the second point; and another mode in that which is separated from the third point; and so on. But when I said that the same amount of motion always remains in matter, I mean this about *the force which impels its parts, which is applied at different times to different parts of matter in accordance with the laws* set out in articles 45 and following of part Two.<sup>15</sup> So there is no need for you to worry about the transmigration of rest from one object to another, since not even motion, considered as a mode which is the contrary to rest, transmigrates in that fashion.<sup>16</sup>

The process that Descartes described here is that of a moving force (of unspecified nature, so far) that applies different quantities of motion to different parts of matter at different times, according to regularities described in *Principles* II; as opposed to bodies that transmit

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<sup>15</sup> Of *Principles of Philosophy*.

<sup>16</sup> CSM III, 382; my italics.

motion to each other in collision. Such moving force can only be God. In fact, this is arguably a consequence of what Descartes wrote in *Meditation III* on creation/conservation:

All of the time of my life can be divided into innumerable parts, each of which is entirely independent of the others, so that from the fact that I existed a short time ago it does not follow that I ought to exist now, unless some cause as it were creates me again in this moment, that it, conserves me.... Plainly, the same force and action is needed to conserve any thing for the individual moments in which it endures as was needed for creating it anew, had it not existed.<sup>17</sup>

In the same text, Descartes proceeded denying that created substances have in themselves the “force and action” necessary for both creation and conservation.

From all these passages, it seems that for Descartes extended substance is utterly inert and incapable of causal action. It seems that at each instant God recreates the world simply switching the places of the various bodies, in accordance to the distribution that took place at the previous instant. Does it make Descartes an occasionalist? An interactionist? A theorist of causal harmony? A decision is beyond the scope of this work. But the problems were well visible to Descartes’ contemporaries, as we know from the *Objections to the Meditations* and even more from Descartes’ extensive correspondence, such as his exchanges with Henry More or Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (on mind-body interaction).

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<sup>17</sup> CSM II, 33-4.

## 1.2 THE NATURE OF THOUGHT AND REPRESENTATION

A definition of ideas is given in Descartes' Second Set of Replies:

*Idea* I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, the immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought. Hence, whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this very fact makes it certain that there is within me an idea of what is being signified by the word in question. Thus it is not only the images depicted in the imagination that I call 'ideas', Indeed, in so far as these images are in the corporal imagination, that is, are depicted in some part of the brain, I do not call them 'ideas' at all; I call them 'ideas' only in so far as they give form to the mind itself, when it is directed towards that part of the brain.

*Objective reality of an idea* By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea.<sup>18</sup>

Ideas are modes of thought, 'informed' by their representational content or objective reality. *Qua* modes of thought, they are unextended, and have none of the properties based on extension (such as shape, motion, etc.). However, they do represent extended things. Descartes' notion of representation is strongly criticized by Pierre Gassendi in his Fifth Set of Objections. The core of the criticism is that it is not possible for something incorporeal to represent bodies and their features.

... I do not so much dispute that you have an idea of this body as insist that you could not have such idea if you were really an unextended thing. For

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<sup>18</sup> CSM II, 113.

how, may I ask, do you think that you, an unextended subject, could receive the semblance or idea of a body that is extended? If such a semblance comes from a body, then it is undoubtedly corporeal, and has a number of parts or layers and so it is extended. If it is imprinted in you from some other source, since it still must represent an extended body, it must still have parts, and hence be extended. For if it lacks parts, how will it manage to represent parts? If it lacks extension, how will it represent an extended thing? ... It seems then that the idea does not wholly lack extension. Yet, if it is extended, how can you, if you are unextended, have become its subject? <sup>19</sup>

Gassendi's objection is partly based on the assumption that resemblance is needed in order to have representation. But Descartes rejected this assumption in several passages in *Meditation VI*, in his 1647 *Comment on a certain Broadsheet*, his *Optics* (1631) and *Principles*. These refutations are aimed in particular at the idea that the qualities of sensations, and related ideas, must resemble the qualities of the represented objects.

However, if Descartes rejected resemblance as the core of representation, he should give a different account of representation. In particular, how do ideas represent their objects, if not by resembling them? Briefly, the representative function is explained in the causal (however this causality is spelled out) relationship between the sensation and its object. As I will discuss soon, this opens the question of the kind of causal relationship (if any) that is possible between bodies and minds, or substances that have nothing in common with each other.

Descartes, however, does not really respond to Gassendi's objection. The clear and distinct ideas we have of bodies as things with shape, weight, size, etc., in themselves are not

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<sup>19</sup> CSM II, 234.

shaped or heavy; and yet, they represent the properties of bodies exactly as they are (God is no deceiver), contrary to sensations, which represent the real properties of bodies through sensory qualities.<sup>20</sup> How does that happen?

Descartes' 'skepticism' strategy started out by inserting a wedge between the certainty of an idea and its truth. What appears to a cognizer with all the psychological characters of certainty is not necessarily true. Descartes went so far as to show that even mathematical 'truths' can be doubted. Then he reached the paradigmatic clear, distinct ('certain') and irrefutably true idea of the *cogito*. The importance of the *cogito* is that it shows the mind what a true idea 'looks like', so that the cognizer will not doubt any more when she sees an idea with those marks. However, between the *cogito* and the rest of our ideas, Descartes inserted the proof of the existence of God as a necessary warrantor that "clear and distinct" are marks of truth. Presumably, a true idea is that which represents its object as having those properties that the object has *formaliter*. In the case of clear and distinct ideas Descartes refers to an immediate perception of the attentive mind, a quasi-eye. Ideas that are neither extended nor shaped are cognized as "being about" extended and shaped things, but we do not really know how. Ultimately, the reason we are justified in believing that what we clearly and distinctly conceive (with the mind's eye, not confused by the

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<sup>20</sup> Clear and distinct ideas of bodies represent them with the properties describable by geometry, such as shape, size, etc. Sensations, on the other hand, are never clear and distinct. They represent objects as having properties such as colors and smells, but do not offer a reliable knowledge of the nature of bodies. The purpose of sensations, as Descartes made clear in his Meditation VI, is to give reliable indications of what objects should be pursued (e.g. a nice-smelling ripe apple) and avoided (e.g. a foul-smelling rotten one) for the welfare of the mind-body union.

senses) as being extended and shaped is indeed extended and shaped is the presence of a non-deceiving God. It may seem (and it certainly looked that way to Spinoza) that Descartes' representationalism is not as robust as the standards for *scientia* require.

### 1.3 PARTICULARS

While Descartes unproblematically assumes that there are many thinking substances (i.e., minds), his position with respect to extended substances (i.e., bodies) seems to involve some ambiguity. In the Synopsis of *Meditations*, for example, Descartes seems to imply that there is only one extended substance, and that what we perceive as different bodies are simply different configurations of accidents (as opposed to minds, that are indeed different substances):

...Absolutely, *all substances*, or things that must be created by God in order to exist, *are by their nature incorruptible, and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God's denying concurrence to them.*

Secondly, we need to recognize that body, taken in a general sense, is a substance, so that it never perishes. But the human body, *insofar as it differs from other bodies*, is simply made up of certain configurations of limbs and other accidents of this sort; whereas the human mind is not made up of any accidents in this way, but is a pure substance. For even if all the accidents of the mind change, so that it has different objects of the understanding and different desires and sensations, it

does not on that account become a different mind; whereas a human body loses its identity merely as a result of a change in the shape of some of its parts.<sup>21</sup>

Here, obviously, Descartes' primary concern is to argue for the immortality of the soul, as opposed to the mortality of the body. However, the fact that a body's identity is given and taken away by modal changes (changes in shape, motion, etc. of its parts) is metaphysically problematic, because it makes substantial changes dependent on modal changes, while substances are supposed to be prior to, and independent of, modes. So, the passage could be interpreted as denying that there is a plurality of extended substances. "Individual" bodies in Descartes are mere aggregates of modes, states of one extended substance. We will see if that is the case.

On the other hand, *Principles* (as well as, consistently, Descartes' letters) supports the interpretation that, for Descartes, there is more than one extended substance:

Strictly speaking, *a real distinction exists only between two or more substances*; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that *we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other...* For example, even though we may not yet know for certain that any extended or corporeal thing exists in reality, the mere fact that we have an idea of such a substance enables us to be certain that it is capable of existing. And we can also be certain that, if it exists, *each and every part of it, as delimited by us in our thought, is really distinct from the other parts of the same substance.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> CSM II, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Principles* I, 60; CSM, II, 213. My italics

If real distinctions are substantial (rather than modal), i.e. two things that are really distinct are different substances; if (as Descartes states in the passage) what we can clearly and distinctly conceive apart from something else is really distinct from that something else; and if we can conceive of parts of extension clearly and distinctly apart from other parts, then these parts are distinct substances. In other words, there can be a plurality of substances of one kind (extended).

Descartes' commitment to a plurality of thinking substances is beyond doubt. His commitment to a plurality of bodies is more problematic, as we have just seen. I believe that ultimately Descartes is a pluralist regarding extended substances. It seems that it is necessary for him to argue for a plurality of human bodies, for otherwise how can he consistently make claims about *his own* body, claims that are a relevant part of *Meditations*?

Either way, the question to ask is: what are the criteria for individuation of particulars? In other words, what makes a body, or a mind, *this* body, or *this* mind, distinguished by other bodies or minds? In *Principles II* Descartes answered this question, at least as far as bodies are concerned:

All the variety in matter, all the diversity of its forms, depends on motion.

The matter existing in the entire universe is thus one and the same, and it is always recognized as matter simply in virtue of its being extended. All the properties which we clearly perceive in it are reducible to its divisibility and consequent mobility in respect of its parts, and its resulting capacity to be affected in all the ways which we perceive as being derivable from the movement of its



parts... Any variation in matter or diversity in its many forms depends on motion.<sup>23</sup>

This confirms that the passage quoted above from the Synopsis to the *Meditations* indeed states that bodies are individuated by motion, which is a mode of the extended substance. However, as I reminded earlier, this is a metaphysical oddity: while Descartes claims that there is a *real* (i.e., substantial) distinction among bodies, he builds this distinction on a difference in modes.<sup>24</sup> Besides, we have the problem of what individuates the parts prior to their being set in motion.

Remember that, as discussed above, extension does not have in itself a motive force. Motion is impelled by God with every act of creation/conservation. But how does God know which part is which, prior to imparting motion? Notice that this is a problem regardless of whether Descartes is a pluralist or a monist. If the mode motion is the only individuating factor, God would have the problem of telling bodies apart from each other, regardless of whether bodies are separated substances or simply parts of a single substance.

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<sup>23</sup> *Principles* II, 23; CSM I, 232

<sup>24</sup> It may be objected that for Descartes there was no problem with individuating substances based on their modes. What is ontologically posterior and dependent can easily become epistemically prior, and there are reasons to believe that this is the reason why Descartes, *contra* Spinoza, accepted that what is ontologically prior could be known only through what is ontologically posterior.

Thinking substance may be more straightforward, and, in the case of human bodies, being united to a mind may give a criterion for individuating bodies (body X being distinguished by its being united to mind X). Descartes briefly discussed this problem in a letter to Mesland:

But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size: we mean simply the whole of the matter which is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though that matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe that it is the same body, *numerically the same body, so long as it remains joined and substantially united with the same soul*; and we think that this body is whole and entire so long as it has in itself all the dispositions required to preserve that union. Nobody denies that we have the same bodies as we had in our infancy... only because they are informed by the <sup>25</sup>same soul.<sup>26</sup>

In this letter, Descartes was trying to solve the problem of transubstantiation in terms of substantial forms, a term that he generally rejected with the significant exceptions of the human soul's role in the mind-body union, and the issue of transubstantiation. So, the human body is individuated by its being informed by a soul, not by motion. Obviously, all this does not solve the problem of individuating non-human bodies.

Descartes did not discuss the issue of individuation of thinking substances. So, presumably, particular thinking substances are individuated by their modes. I can only conjecture

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<sup>25</sup> The soul, for Descartes, is a source of motion as well, through the agency of the will.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Mesland, Feb. 9, 1645; CMS, III, 243.

that God can individuate (and consistently recreate) souls because he created them with such and such modes to begin with.

#### **1.4 THE PROBLEM OF SUBSTANCE IN DESCARTES: “KEEPING THE DISTANCE”**

Reading Descartes, one often has the impression that he wants to have his cake and eat it too. His discussions of causation are an egregious example of this attitude. Another way of seeing this is, of course, that Descartes was struggling with models of causation that seemed to open new problems for each problem they solved.

Descartes' philosophical agenda included a crusade against the Scholastics' 'junk terminology.' When attending one of the best schools in France, he learned (as he wrote in the beginning of *Discourse on Method*) “that Philosophy gives us the means to speak plausibly about any subject, and of winning the admiration of the less learned,” but on leaving school he had more puzzles than when he started. He concluded that most of the conceptual baggage of the Scholastics was useless and non-explanatory, to say the least, and he started out to substitute it with a new conceptual machinery that would accomplish the feat of explaining reality starting with self evident principles and a fool-proof method.

Descartes' alleged dismissal of Scholastic ideas should not be overestimated. It is very clear that Descartes was deeply indebted to the Scholastics, as shown by several scholars.<sup>27</sup> We will see in this and the next chapter that Descartes shared some significant problems that plagued Scholastic philosophers, in particular in explicating the causal relationship between God and the world.

Among the concepts that Descartes planned to eliminate from the philosophical lexicon was "substantial forms."<sup>28</sup> Substantial forms, Descartes wrote, were

introduced by philosophers for no other reason than to account for the actions proper to natural things, of which the form is the principle and root.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, here is how the Coimbra *Commentary* on Aristotle's *Physics* discussed substantial forms:

Singular natural things have certain proper and peculiar functions, for instance human beings reason, horses neigh, fire heats, etc.; but such functions cannot arise from matter, which, as we have shown above, has no effective power, therefore they arise from the substantial form. And it is not sufficient to say that they arise from matter supplied with accidents. For, I ask, why are these accidents

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<sup>27</sup> For example, see Secada's *Cartesian Metaphysics, Descartes' Meditations-Background Source Material* (Ariew, Cottingham and Sorell, eds.), and Helen Hattab's "Conflicting Causalities," in Garber and Nadler. Also, Machamer and McGuire (in manuscript).

<sup>28</sup> With a significant exception, the human soul, as we have seen.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to Regius, Jan 1624; CSM III, 202.

rather than other ones found in this matter; why does heat rather than cold belong to fire?<sup>30</sup>

An explanation is needed for why things do what they do, and for why they have the properties they have, because matter has no inherent powers. So, substantial forms, making the things ‘what they are’, fill this explanatory role. Notice that in the Scholastic tradition substantial forms did *not* have causal powers in themselves: causal powers were accidents inhering to them.

Descartes, like many of his contemporaries (another egregious example is Hobbes) thought that substantial forms were non-explanatory and unnecessary. They are non-explanatory because they amounted to explaining something through itself, which made them viciously circular. Famously, the French playwright Molière, in his 1673 *Le Malade Imaginaire*, mocked this kind of circular explanations in medicine with his *Virtus Dormitiva*, which explains opium’s power to put you to sleep through... opium’s power to put you to sleep. For Descartes, and many of his contemporaries, substantial forms are unnecessary: the qualities and powers of natural things that the Scholastics explained through layers of forms and accidents could be explained more effectively through a simpler metaphysics.

As discussed previously, Descartes’ extended substance is inert, and motion, its mode, is described as change of place. The moving force is God. This makes it almost irresistible to conclude that Descartes denies any causal action to created substance, in particular to extended substance. However, Descartes maintained insistently all his life (until his very last work *The*

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<sup>30</sup> *Commentarii Conimbricenses in octos libros physicorum Aristotelis*, 1.9.9.2, pp. 179-80; quoted in Rozemond, p. 104.

*Passions of the Soul*<sup>31</sup>) that bodies and minds interact causally. Commentators such as Hobbes, Gassendi, Arnauld, or princess Elizabeth of Bohemia repeatedly pushed him to explain how two substances that have nothing in common can causally interact with each other. Descartes' response always sounded almost puzzled, as if he just did not see what the big deal is: after all, he repeated over and over, we know that minds and bodies interact causally because we experience it in our everyday life. If you cannot see this, he wrote Princess Elizabeth, that means you should take some time out, drop your books and go play.<sup>32</sup> In a response to Clesrelrier,<sup>33</sup> Descartes denies that from the fact that minds and bodies have nothing in common it follows that they cannot interact with each other. Also, he wrote Arnauld:

That the mind, which is incorporeal, can impel a body, is not shown to us by any reasoning or comparison with other things, but is shown daily by the most certain and most evident experience. For this one thing is among the things known *per se*, which we obscure when we try to explain through other things.<sup>34</sup>

So, minds and bodies interact with each other, and we cannot offer a philosophical explanation of it because that would require reducing the properties of the mind-body union to the properties of mind and of body: such thing, Descartes claims, is impossible. Assuming that

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<sup>31</sup> See for example *Meditation VI* on the existence of external bodies, or *Passions of the Soul* (1648), I 17: “it is often not our soul which makes them such as they are, and the soul always receives them from the things that are represented by them.” (CSM I 335)

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Elizabeth, June 28, 1643; CSM III, 227.

<sup>33</sup> CSM II, 275.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Arnauld, July 29, 1648; CSM III, 358.

this is indeed the picture that Descartes endorsed, we still have a big problem, a problem that we will see plagued a whole philosophical tradition preceding Descartes.

A generally accepted axiom of causation is the idea that nothing comes from nothing, or *nihil ex nihilo*. Creation is *ex nihilo* simply in the sense that there is no other cause of it but God (as opposed, for example, to eternally existing matter), not in the sense that something is brought into existence from nothing absolutely. As a consequence, whatever is in the effect must somehow *be contained previously in the cause*. This last statement is known as the *containment principle*, and, like the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom from which it is derived, was a constant in the Scholastic tradition, and fully accepted by Descartes. An application of the containment principle is the *similarity principle*. This is called by Descartes a “common axiom and a true one” in *Conversations with Burman* (1648): the effect must have *something in common with the cause*, therefore be *similar* to it under some respect (we will see how this principle was articulated in the notion of eminent causation). If the cause had nothing in common with the effect, then the containment principle would be falsified: the characters of the effect, not being contained in the cause, would indeed come from nothing.

To sum up, here are the axiom and the causal principles following from it:

**Axiom.**: Nothing comes from nothing.

**Containment principle:** the effect must have been contained in the cause (or it would come from nothing).

**Similarity principle:** the effect must have something in common with the cause (because whatever is in the effect must have been in the cause).

That Descartes endorsed the similarity principle is clear from the passage in *Conversation with Burman* where he uses the similarity principle to argue for the innateness of ideas. That

Descartes endorsed as well the containment principle is clear, among other things, from his description of causation as some sort of ‘transmission’ of properties from the cause to the effect, in this passage in Meditation III:

It is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much (reality) in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause: for *where could the effect get that reality from*, if not from the cause? And how could the cause *give it to the effect*, unless it possessed it?<sup>35</sup>

The importance of these principles for understanding Cartesian, as well as Scholastic, models of causation cannot be overestimated. In particular we will see that several difficult problems stem from endorsing these principles while at the same time positing a transcendent God, or (as Descartes did) mind-body dualism. Because neither mind nor God contain extension, and bodies certainly do not contain thought, it seems that the above principles would prevent any causal interaction. But we have seen that Descartes believed that minds and bodies interact, and that God not only creates matter, but continuously conserves it and motion. How is this possible?

At the horizontal level, i.e. when it comes to causal relations between created substances, the problem can be solved by denying that Descartes ascribed any *genuine* causal action to extended substances, or maybe to all created substances. In this passage from a letter to Elizabeth of Bohemia, Descartes states that, at least in some sense, God must be the cause of *every single thing that happens*:

... For one can only prove that He exists by considering Him a supremely perfect being, and he would not be supremely perfect *if something happened that did not derive entirely from him*... The Scholastic distinction between universal

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<sup>35</sup> CMS II, 28, my italics.



and particular causes is out of place here. The sun, although the universal cause of all flowers, is not the cause of the difference between tulips and roses; but that is because their production depends also on some other particular causes which are not subordinated to the sun. God is the universal cause of everything in such a way, that he is in the same way the *total cause of everything*, and thus nothing can happen without his will.<sup>36</sup>

This passage (and the rest of the letter) does not make any distinction between God's causal action in the realm of extension, and in the realm of thought. In other words, while Descartes' example refers to the realm of bodies, his unqualified statement is that nothing happens without God's willing it and being its cause. Can it be concluded that God is the only true causal agent? Dan Garber argues that the context of the letter should be kept in mind: Descartes was comforting the Princess in distress.<sup>37</sup> Presumably, pointing out to her that every event is willed by a benevolent God *ab aeterno* was a gentle (and risk-free) way to help her see things in perspective. I disagree with Garber's interpretation" I believe that an alternative interpretation of this passage, in terms of the idea of divine concurrence(which, as we will see in another chapter, was discussed extensively by Suárez),<sup>38</sup> is more plausible.

The idea behind concurrent causation is that without God's concurrence things, even when endowed with authentic causal powers, cannot bring about their effects unless God 'helps out.' The basic argument for concurrent causation was that, since things cannot even continue

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<sup>36</sup> Letter to Princess Elizabeth, Oct. 6, 1645; CSM III, 272.

<sup>37</sup> See Garber, "Descartes and Occasionalism," in *Descartes Embodied*.

<sup>38</sup> Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations* 20 and 21.

existing unless God preserves them (or continuously recreates them), of course they could not cause independently of such sustenance. The problem, of course, is what kind of causal action can be ascribed to something that is so utterly dependent on God. As we will see, Suárez insisted that created things are authentic principal causes, even if they need God's cooperation. The rationale for this insistence is a commitment to explanations through secondary causes, conforming to the tenets of Scholastic philosophy, and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that, unless something (for example a man) is a causal agent, there cannot be free will. Is Descartes adopting the same picture?

While this is not the place for an extensive discussion, it seems to me that Descartes' doctrine of continuous recreation brings serious problems for the idea that things can be authentic causes, even with God's concurrence (I will argue that Suárez had an analogous problem in a later chapter.) Descartes seems more inclined towards a theory of horizontal causation as causal harmony.<sup>39</sup> In this model, God recreates the world at each moment, and is the only genuine efficient cause; however, the state of things at a time determines how God will recreate the world at the successive instant. For example, if at  $t_0$  a moving body A hits a stationary body B of equal mass, this will determine that at time  $t_1$  body A will lose part of its motion and body B will start moving, or, better yet, that God will create body A with a smaller quantity of motion, and body B with some quantity of motion. The state of created things at each moment is a necessary determinant of what will come next, thus allowing us to make causal claims at the horizontal level (such as 'A hit B and caused it to move'); but there is no causation

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<sup>39</sup> I am indebted for this analysis to Peter Machamer and Ted McGuire, who kindly let me peek at their manuscript on Descartes' concept of causation. Also, see Hattab in Garber and Nadler (Hattab's discussion is limited to the realm of physical causation).

proper, because the only power and activity comes from God. If this interpretation is correct, then the causal axioms that Descartes posited (including the similarity principle) apply only at the vertical level, and mind-body causation does not violate them for the simple reason that it is not *vertical* causation, or causation in the first and principal sense.

It is then only at the vertical level that the causal axiom, in particular *nihil ex nihilo* and its consequences (the containment principle and the similarity principle) work. However, we still have a problem of consistency with the causal principles. The containment principle and the similarity principle seem to rule out the possibility that a transcendent, immaterial God could bring about matter and material effects. How is it possible for God to bring about material effects? Even thinking substances, though certainly more commensurable to God than extended ones, are problematic, because of the infinite gap between God's nature and the nature of any created thing.

Descartes answers this question endorsing the Scholastic concept of eminent containment, in *Meditation III*. When discussing what could have caused his own idea of God, Descartes argues

Now, it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect, unless it possessed it? It follows from this both that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect –that it, contains in itself more reality- cannot arise from what is less perfect. And this is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess what the philosophers call actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one

is considering only what they call objective reality. A stone, for example, which previously did not exist, cannot begin to exist unless it is produced by something that contains either formally or eminently everything to be found in the stone.<sup>40</sup>

And, in his Second Set of Replies:

Something is said to exist eminently in an object, when, although it does not correspond exactly to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can *fill the role* of that which does so correspond.<sup>41</sup>

So, God can create everything that is ontologically inferior because he contains it eminently, or because of his infinite power and perfection. There is no perfection which is not contained at least eminently in God, and this includes matter.

However, what exactly does it mean to contain something *eminently*? Though I am (hopefully) much more perfect than, say, a rat, I cannot produce a baby rat, no matter how hard I try. Mom rat and dad rat, on the other hand, though much less perfect than me, can accomplish the feat without much effort. Clearly, being more perfect is not enough.

Descartes responded to a similar objection in a letter to Mesland (May 2, 1644). Mesland was puzzled by Descartes' position that what can create the more difficult can create the easier as well, and what can create the more perfect can create the less perfect. Mesland's objection (similar to the criticism moved by Spinoza in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, P7, Sch., which I will discuss in the next chapter) was that we know by experience that less perfect creatures than us can perform what we cannot. For example, humans cannot easily weave webs

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<sup>40</sup> CSM II, 28.

<sup>41</sup> CSM II, 114; my italics.

like spiders do. Humans cannot give birth to rats. Descartes' response was that this was true in the realm of "physical and moral causes that are particular and limited," not for a universal and infinite cause: the latter has no such limitations. Yet, in all the accounts we have of eminent causation there is no mention of this distinction. There does not seem to be any plausible metaphysical reason why limited creatures cannot be the eminent cause of less perfect things, unless, of course, we accept that horizontal causation is 'limited' in the sense that it is not causation in the first and principal sense.

As we will see, Suárez's account of eminent causation, in his *Metaphysical Disputations*, states that eminent containment is not the causal power itself: rather, the latter is a consequence of the former. In other words, it is because A eminently contains B that it can create B, and not that A's eminent containment of B is A's power to bring B about.<sup>42</sup> So, Descartes' statement that the eminent cause can "fill the role" of something possessing the perfection formally is non-explanatory, and does not really address the issue of "what it means" to contain something eminently. The rat example should show that a simple "quantitative" superiority, i.e. "having more reality or perfection," is not enough to have eminent containment. On the other hand, if we accept that ontological superiority is not enough at the horizontal level, and that God is the only cause proper, we do not have this contradiction.

In his "The Cartesian dialectic of Creation," Thomas Lennon pointed out the pantheistic/emanationistic implications of Descartes' doctrine of causal containment. Descartes' distinction between actual (formal) and eminent containment does not solve the problem the way Descartes wants to solve it, Lennon claims. According to the distinction, the cause must contain the effect either *formally* or *eminently*: in the latter case, it must contain the power to bring about

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<sup>42</sup> Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputation* 21.

the effect without containing the effect *formally*. When Descartes claimed that God contains matter eminently, he was saying that God has the power to bring about matter and its properties *without having any of these formally in his essence*. In Descartes' terms, God contains all the perfections of matter without the imperfection: so, he contains in his essence matter in a more perfect form than what he creates.

According to Lennon, this will not do: "if actual containment, then we have a kind of pantheism; if sheer power, then we still have a violation of the 'ex nihilo' principle."<sup>43</sup> To be more precise, it is not so much the *nihil ex nihilo* principle itself which is violated, but the similarity requirement. Similarity (sharing some properties) is a necessary condition for causation in the vertical sense. If corporeal motions are not similar to the ideas in the mind, then they cannot have caused them: and it is unclear how something that has none of the properties of matter can be similar to moving chunks of matter. But we have seen that Descartes (for example in *Conversation with Burman*) seemed to share Lennon's worry that, unless there is some form of *actual* containment (of properties that are in the cause and the effect), the *nihil ex nihilo* clause is violated.

The notion of eminent containment is necessary because of the conflict between two principles, both accepted by Descartes (and the Scholastic tradition). On the one hand, we have seen the causal principles following from the axiom *nihil ex nihilo*. On the other hand, there are specific theological constraints posed to metaphysics by the belief in a transcendent and omnipotent God on which everything is ontologically and causally dependent. The 'keeping the distance' theological principle, as I call it, follows from the doctrines of the purity, simplicity and transcendence of the divine nature as pure being, and the utter dependence of created beings,

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<sup>43</sup> Lennon, in Garber and Ayers (eds), vol. I, page 334.

who, *qua* not pure being, cannot even persist in existence unless preserved by God's continuous causal action. The principle, briefly stated, posits that, in order to maintain the 'purity' of divine nature, God must have little, if anything, in common with the beings he created, and yet be the very principle on which their existence depends. The purity of the divine essence is undermined if God has anything in common with the imperfect beings that he created: beings that are finite, divisible, ontologically and causally dependent, not to mention (in the case of humans) deeply flawed morally. For these reasons, the nature of God (who is infinitely infinite, perfect, perfectly simple, unlimited in power and understanding, morally flawless, and so on and so forth) must be incommensurable with his creatures.

This gives rise to what I will call the 'keeping the distance' problem: the need to 'tweak' the notion of causation in order to both accommodate the causal principles and the belief in a God that has nothing in common with its effects and yet is their cause *secundum esse* (and in a sense also *secundum fieri*).

It is in order to solve the 'keeping the distance' problem that Descartes reintroduced the Scholastic notion of a causal agent who, though not sharing properties with the effect formally (such as divisibility, or extension), has these properties eminently, or in such a way as to be able to 'fill the role' of these properties. God's having extension eminently means that he can bring about anything that extended objects can bring about. Lennon rightly pointed out that either the containment principle is unacceptably vague, or the notion that God contains its effects comes dangerously close to some form of determinism and/or pantheism. We will see, in discussing Suárez, that Lennon's remarks apply to him as well.

With Descartes, we have a philosophical system in which God's more or less arbitrary decisions ultimately explain all causal relations, at both the horizontal and the vertical level. I say

‘arbitrary’ because Descartes insistently maintained that everything, including logical truths, depends on the will of God (though, reassuringly, God is constant and merciful, and therefore sticks to his decisions once he made them).

To sum up: a philosophically aware reader cannot help but notice how Descartes is struggling with traditional models of causation, adapting them to a new philosophy of nature where the only relevant features were matter and motion (matter for Descartes is inactive and has no forces). The wish to eliminate substantial forms and real qualities motivate Descartes to posit matter and motion exclusively; which left him with the puzzle of how traditional models of efficient causation would adapt to this new context.<sup>44</sup> However, Descartes also inherited the difficult ‘keeping the distance’ problem from the Scholastic tradition. God fills a lot of gaps in Descartes’ philosophy; however, it is no surprise that other philosophers would try to conceptualize God’s relationship to the world in less obscure and arbitrary terms.

## **1.5 THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE “KEEPING THE DISTANCE” PROBLEM: SUMMING UP**

Descartes described substance in two different and related terms: as that which exists in itself, and as that in which properties inhere. The definition quoted earlier, from *Principles*, I, 52, states that substance is an equivocal term: in its proper sense, as that “which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence,” the definition applies only to God. However, created

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<sup>44</sup> As I mentioned earlier, Descartes rejected the idea that modes can be transferred from a substance to another.



substances can be distinguished from non-substances, being those that depend only on God's action to exist, and on nothing else. Everything that needs a *substratum*, a 'sublayer,' in order to exist is a mode or attribute.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the other definition of substance, offered in the Second Set of Replies:

Each thing in which inheres immediately, as in a subject, or through which exists something that we perceive, that is, some property or quality, or attribute, of which a real idea is in us, is called a substance.<sup>46</sup>

Both definitions belong to the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition (Thomas, Suárez, Eustachius of St. Paul, etc.). The basic idea, of course, is that a substance is what can exist on its own, as opposed to what needs something else in order to exist. Notice that this kind of ontological independence does not need to imply causal independence. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, substance is what is most properly said to *be*.<sup>47</sup> In Aristotle's discussion of substance, while he accepts that the term "substance" can be used in several ways, the most appropriate use of the term is to denote the things that exist on their own, as opposed to inhering in other. Such things, though, are not causally independent. The distinction between causal and ontological independence is kept by the Scholastic tradition, with the distinction between two different kinds of causal dependence: *secundum fieri* and *secundum esse*. Substances depend on other substances *secundum fieri*: a puppy comes into being because it is generated (brought into

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<sup>45</sup> For the distinction, see *Principles*, 1, 56; CSM I, 211, quoted above.

<sup>46</sup> CMS II 114.

<sup>47</sup> *Metaphysics*, Γ 2, 1003b 15.

being) by its dog parents.<sup>48</sup> However, when it comes to their having any being at all, created substances depend *secundum esse* only on God. Created substances are independent from each other (i.e. horizontally) *secundum esse*. So, substance is an *equivocal* term: in its stricter sense, it involves both causal and ontological independence, but things can be substances even if they lack the latter, and, in a strong sense, the former (since all created substances depend, *secundum fieri*, on both God and other substances<sup>49</sup>). It is only at the horizontal lever, i.e. relative to each other, that we can call substances ontologically independent.

While no metaphysician of the seventeenth century would have argued against Descartes' claim that God's ontological status is different from that of "created things," one could have objected to the necessity of using the same term, "substance," to denote two different kinds of ontological status. Here is why the second sense of "substance," as "that which does not inhere in anything," "that which is a sublayer" is relevant: for Descartes, things do not inhere in God, but

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<sup>48</sup> As I will show in the discussion on Suárez, the doctrine of divine concurrente poses serious questions on whether created substances are really causes *secundum fieri*, and in what sense.

<sup>49</sup> Substances depend *secundum fieri* primarily from the secondary cause that brings them into being. However, because of the doctrine of concurrent causation, things depend *secundum fieri* from God as well as from their secondary causes, because these would not be able to carry out their effect without God's causal concurrence.

exist separately, though utterly dependently on him. So, contrary to *Principles* I, 52,<sup>50</sup> there is a sense in which God and created things *qua* substances have something in common: they do not inhere in a subject, as properties do.

Why would it be such a bad thing to conceive of created things as inhering in God? As the violent reactions to Spinoza's philosophy showed, the most disturbing consequence of this position is that it would make human imperfections exist "in" God, as his modes. If everything that exists is a mode of God, and evil and sin exist, then God is evil and sin. The problem of how could human imperfections come into being if they did not derive from God was a sore spot for traditional metaphysics; it was generally solved via the Augustinian framework that made imperfections equivalent to that "nothingness" of which created things participate, necessarily, by being *created*. The solution leaves open the question of why would moral evil (the most conspicuous human imperfection) be such a big deal, for God, as to justify the sacrifice of the Son. After all, if it is "nothingness," there should not be a need for redemption. However, theodicy is not part of my discussion.

As I argued in the previous section, the problem of divine transcendence is fundamental if one wants to understand the tensions in Cartesian philosophy, and (as I will explain soon) Spinoza's reaction to it. Because of theological constraints, the concept of created substance must involve, at the same time, its dependence on God, and its *ontological* distance from God. This conflict, which I called the "keeping the distance" problem, affects the notion of substance as well as the model of causation. The conflict lies in explicating a causal relationship between

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<sup>50</sup> "Hence the term 'substance' does not apply *univocally*, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things: that is, there is *no intelligible meaning* of the term which is common to God and his creature." CSM II, 210; my italics.

relata which are incommensurably different from each other: this flies in the face of commonly held axioms of causation. So, the concept of “eminent causation” comes to the rescue: in it, the similarity between the relata required by the containment principle is much looser.

Then there is the question of the ontological status and causal powers of created things. Because created things are not supposed to have any kind of independence from God, horizontal causation as well as their status as substances becomes problematic. Descartes admits, in *Principles* I, 40-41, that it is a mystery how, on the one hand, nothing happens without God being the total cause of it (i.e. God willing it and bringing it into being), and on the other hand man has free will. I read Descartes as endorsing a harmony model of horizontal causation. Regardless of whether the reading is accurate, all I am interested in, for the purpose of this work, is to argue that Descartes could be plausibly read this way.

The question of causation at the horizontal level plagues Descartes’ discussion of representation as well. Early on in his career, in order to reject the Scholastic explanation of perception based on *species*, or semblances, Descartes disputed the doctrine that similarity is required for representation. *Species* are not needed to explain perception because sensations are not necessarily similar to what they represent. If the similarity requirement for representation is dropped,<sup>51</sup> so falls one of the main objections to a corpuscularian theory of sense perception.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, in his 1647 *Comment on a certain broadsheet* (CSM I, 304) Descartes uses the causal similarity principle to argue that sensations cannot be caused by external objects *because they do not resemble them* and that therefore all ideas must be innate. The passage is puzzling, especially because Descartes will deny ever saying that all ideas are innate in his interview with Frans Burnman. I suspect that in *Comment* Descartes was mainly concerned with attacking Regius, and distancing himself from him as much as possible.

However, Descartes needed to account somehow for how sensations, and more generally ideas, represent things. He did that by arguing that ideas represent what *causes* them; which opened another problem, given that (as we have seen) causation at the horizontal level is not causation proper. Ultimately, Descartes cannot do better than founding representation in God's will, which may rightly be considered arbitrary, but which is consistent with his metaphysics of causal harmony.

The other two problems I discussed, the problem of particulars and the nature of extension, are related as well to the "keeping the distance" problem. We have seen that for Descartes matter has no causal power and is individuated simply by its motion. Yet, we have seen that by defining matter as inert, and motion in terms of change of space (so, without reference to any activity), Descartes failed to give a satisfactory account of what individuates particular bodies, from the point of view of God. I am not here claiming that all of Descartes' problems would not exist, if only Descartes had given up the "keeping the distance" principle. However, I hope I made the case that a philosopher at the time could have realized that there was a strong relationship between the way substance and causation were conceptualized by

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<sup>52</sup> In her "Mind-Body Interaction and Metaphysical Consistency: a Defense of Descartes," Eileen O'Neill denies that Descartes held what I call the causal similarity principle. I disagree with her discussion, for two reasons. First, because Descartes uses the similarity principle in his argument for innateness (it is a fundamental part of the argument); second, because eminent causation, as O'Neill defines it (without the similarity requirement) becomes non-explanatory, and amounts to a statement of ignorance. I am not sure Descartes would have wanted that.

Descartes, and these problems. The following chapter will discuss Spinoza's own interpretation of Descartes in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*.

## 2.0 SPINOZA'S CAREER AS A MONIST: DECONSTRUCTING DESCARTES' METAPHYSICS

By the 1640s, there was open war between the defenders of the Scholastic-Aristotelian tradition and the Cartesians, guided by Regius' attack on traditional metaphysics.<sup>53</sup> In particular, Gisbert Voetius, in his 1641 essay "On the Natures and Substantial Forms of Things,"<sup>54</sup> stated that the concept of substantial form is necessary to a philosophical understanding of nature, because only through this notion can one explain

The distinction between the entity of substance and accident, for in their theory, there cannot be any substantial difference between a wolf, a sheep, a whale, an elephant<sup>55</sup> ...

In Voetius' conclusion, the real distinction between substances would collapse, because ultimately all distinctions would be accidental. Regius' reply, fully Cartesian, was that things in nature differ only in terms of their motion, shape, size, etc, and that these were the only philosophically relevant distinctions. Of course, this was exactly what Voetius objected to: the

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<sup>53</sup> Alarmed by Regius' aggressive stance, Descartes openly 'disowned' him. See Descartes' 1647 *Comment on a certain broadsheet*.

<sup>54</sup> See discussion in Van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality*.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality*, p. 60.

idea that bodies differ only through their modes, rather than by substantial distinction. But a Cartesian had no problem with this metaphysical oddity, as seen in the previous chapter. The battle soon got ugly, with reciprocal accusations of blasphemy, and reciprocal attempts to get scholars fired from their university jobs. Descartes himself reacted, with his Letter to Dinet, when in 1642 the university of Utrecht officially prohibited the teaching of Cartesianism for being contrary to the traditional philosophy, and for teaching a number of absurdities.<sup>56</sup> In response to Descartes, Voetius's student Martin Schook wrote an essay entitled *Admiranda methodus novae philosophicae Renati Des Cartes* (1643), which contained interesting objections to Cartesianism mixed with venomous personal attacks (in response to Descartes' own venomous personal attacks on Voetius).

By 1645, however, Descartes had triumphed. He had an increasingly significant following in Holland, especially at the university of Leiden, where Adriaan Heereboord, after succeeding his teacher Franco Petri Burgersdijk, began teaching Cartesianism. This did not stop the opposition, of course. Attempts on the part of the curators of the university (and even an intervention of the Stadtholder) to invite teachers to stick to Aristotelianism failed to contain the irrepressible expansion of Cartesianism. According to Van Bunge, a significant factor in the success of Cartesianism was Descartes' protest that he did not intend for philosophy to trespass in the field of theology. While Voetius and his allies had seen right away how Cartesianism constituted a danger for theological conformism, this became generally clear only later in the century, with the 1666 anonymous publication of Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophy as Interpreter of the Scriptures*, which raised again the anti-Cartesian furor together with a backlash against freethinkers.

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<sup>56</sup> Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*.



This bit of background is to show that no self-respecting philosopher living in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Holland could have, or would have, avoided to measure himself against Cartesianism. And so it is quite certain that it was with the goal of understanding and perfecting Cartesian philosophy that the friends of the Spinoza circle met, and eventually asked Spinoza to publish his notes.<sup>57</sup>

*The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was the only one of Spinoza's works that was published in his lifetime under his name. It was published in 1663, with a preface by his friend Lodewijk Meyer, and an appendix entitled *Appendix containing Metaphysical Thoughts (In which are briefly explained the chief things that commonly occur in the general part of Metaphysics, concerning Being and its Affections)*, under Spinoza's supervision. According to Spinoza's own account (in letters to Meyer and Oldenburg<sup>58</sup>), *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was composed at the request of his friends in Amsterdam. Meyer's preface reports the circumstances: after hearing that Spinoza had written a "geometrical" rendition of Part II of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* for his student Caesarius, Spinoza's circle of friends insisted that he should produce a geometrical version of Part I as well. In a letter to Meyer, Spinoza reminded him that he composed the whole work in less than two weeks, that he gave the arguments in a different order (in order to avoid an unnecessary increase in the number of

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, Meyer, in the end of his *Philosophy as Interpreter of Scriptures*, mentions a publication on God, the rational soul, and human happiness, which would finally bring Cartesian philosophy to its final perfection. See the reference in Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> Ep. 12 A and Ep.13, both written in July 1663.

axioms), that he offered demonstrations of things that Descartes “merely asserted,” and that his exposition of Descartes did not imply an endorsement of all of Descartes’ philosophy.

By the time *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was composed, Spinoza already held many of the metaphysical positions that constitute the core of *Ethics*, on God, determinism, substance and the nature of mind and body. In particular, as we will see in the next chapter, his earlier *Short Treatise* contained a strong argument against Cartesian dualism, indeterminism and free will, and transcendence. So, when Spinoza was constructing valid arguments (or at least arguments that he judged valid) towards conclusions he did not accept, he must have started from premises that he considered unacceptable.

Indeed, Meyer’s preface points out that

... although he [Spinoza] holds some of the doctrines to be true, and admits that some are his own additions, there are many he rejects as false, holding a very different opinion.

Of this sort... are statements concerning the Will... although they appear to be laboriously and meticulously *proved*. For he does not consider the Will to be distinct from the Intellect, far less endowed with freedom of that kind...<sup>59</sup> (my italics)

In this part of my discussion, I will examine Spinoza’s *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, as well as his *Metaphysical Thoughts*, for two related purposes: to gain an understanding of Spinoza’s interpretation of Descartes, and to make the case that Spinoza’s movement towards monism (his unique brand of monism) was motivated by the problems that plagued Descartes’ philosophy.

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<sup>59</sup> Meyer, “Preface” to Spinoza’s *Principles*.

In the previous part, I suggested that many of the problems plaguing Descartes' metaphysics could be explained in terms of a conflict between generally accepted causal principles, on the one hand, and the constraints of the Christian doctrine of the relationship between God and the world, on the other (the "keeping the distance" problem). In this part I will begin to show that Spinoza saw this conflict, and saw that Descartes' discussion of the mind as thinking substance, of the mind-body relation, and especially of the relationship between God and created things are inconsistent with a proper understanding of causation (and of substance).

Unfortunately, we do not have much in the way of texts showing Spinoza's philosophical development. However, we will see that all the early texts we have show that, for him, knowledge of God was both the foundation of a sound philosophical system and the best way to understand one's place in the world and eliminate those unrealistic expectations that make one so miserable in this life. In particular, one of Spinoza's constant polemic targets was the idea that there is anything above and beyond "an eternal order and Nature's fixed laws," as he put it in his first work, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*<sup>60</sup>. Descartes' attempts at reconciling a mechanistic natural philosophy with the traditional Christian vision of a transcendent God must have struck Spinoza as a glaring example of the kind of fallacy that is most likely to generate delusions and misery.

It is important to indicate right away the strategy that Spinoza used in his discussion of Descartes' philosophical tenets. While Spinoza would agree with Descartes (or Hobbes) that the geometrical order of exposition works insofar as it starts from principles that are true and crystal clear, we will see that the propositions that Spinoza chooses as axioms or definitions are mostly

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<sup>60</sup> See Chapter 4 for problems with the chronology of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

rejected by him in works that were written before or at the same time as *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. In some points, Spinoza seems to play an informal *reductio ad absurdum* game with his readers, telling them, as it were, “Look what happens when you take these absurdities as your starting points.”

## 2.1 THE NATURE OF EXTENSION

As discussed in a previous chapter, Descartes can be plausibly read as positing an extended substance utterly inert and devoid of causal powers. At each instant, Descartes wrote in *Principles*, God recreates the world simply switching the places of the various bodies, in accordance to the distribution that took place at the previous instant. While causation will be discussed extensively in a later section, now I will examine Spinoza’s discussion of Part II of Descartes’ *The Principles of Philosophy*, to confirm that this was his reading of Descartes on extended substance. Most of Spinoza’s discussion matches Descartes’ *Principles* quite closely, though I will not here refer to the Cartesian text.

The definition of extended substance and the proof of the real distinction between mind and body are in Part I:

D7: A substance which is the immediate subject of extension and of accidents which presuppose extension, like figure, position, local motion, etc. is called a body.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Curley vol. I, page 239

P8: Mind and body are really distinct.

Dem: Whatever we can perceive clearly can be made by God as we perceive it (P7C). But (by P3 and P4) we clearly perceive the mind, i.e. (D6) a thinking substance, without the body, i.e. (D7) without any extended substance. Conversely, we perceive the body clearly without the mind (as everyone will readily concede). So, the mind can exist without the body, and the body can exist without the mind—at least by divine power.

Now, substances which can exist without each other are really distinct (D10). But the mind and the body are substances (by D5, D6, D7), which can each exist without the other (as we have just proven). So the mind and the body are really distinct.<sup>62</sup>

The real distinction of mind and body is demonstrated on the basis of their being substances (as per definitions), of their conceptual independence, and on the power of God to create whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive. The conceptual independence of mind is proven through our ability to doubt the existence of the body, but not of the mind. This, in turn, relies on Axiom 2:

A2: There are reasons that make us doubt of the existence of our body.<sup>63</sup>

These ‘reasons’ have been summarized by Spinoza in his *Prolegomenon*, and by and large recapitulate the argument in *Meditation 1*.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Curley, v.1, page253

<sup>63</sup> Curley, v. 1, page 240.

The discussion of motion in Part II as well matches, and expands on, Descartes' discussion:

P8: Local motion is the transfer of one part of matter, or one body, from the vicinity of those bodies that touch it immediately, and are considered as resting, to the vicinity of others.

Descartes uses this definition to explain local motion. To understand it properly, we must consider:

1) That he understands by a part of matter whatever is transferred at the same time, even though it in turn may consist of many parts<sup>65</sup>.

2) That for the sake of avoiding confusion he speaks in his definition only of what is constantly in the mobile thing, viz. the transfer, in order not to confuse this, as others frequently do, with the force or action that moves it...

3) That he says the transfer takes place from the vicinity of contiguous bodies into the vicinity of others, and not from one place to another<sup>66</sup>. For place, as he has explained in II, 13, is not something real, but depends merely on our thought, so that the same body can be said at the same time both to change and

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<sup>64</sup> By the time Spinoza wrote *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (1663), he had already criticized methodical doubt as an epistemic tool in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (presumably written between 1659-60; see Chapter 4).

<sup>65</sup> Cfr. Descartes' *Principles*, II, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. Descartes' *Principles*, II, 28.

not to change place. But it cannot be said at the same time both to be transferred and not to be transferred from the vicinity of a contiguous body.

4. That he does not say absolutely that the transfer takes place from the vicinity of contiguous bodies, but only from the vicinity of those which are regarded as being at rest. If body A is transferred from body B, which is at rest, the same force and action are required on one part as on the other.<sup>67</sup>

Descartes' themes are all included in Spinoza's discussion of motion: the definition of transfer with respect of neighboring bodies *considered at rest*, the rejection of absolute space, and the distinction between motion and the force which is the source of motion. Also included is the reference of "a body" to "that which is moved at the same time," which I will discuss in a later section on individuation and particulars.

It is after P11 that Spinoza starts inquiring into the cause of motion:

Sch. To P11: ...There is the primary, or general cause, which is the cause of all the motions that there are in the world, and there is *the particular cause, by which it comes about that the individual parts of matter acquire motion that they did not have before*. As far as the general cause is concerned, since nothing is to be admitted except what we perceive clearly and distinctly... and since we do not clearly and distinctly understand any other cause except God (i.e. the creator of matter), it is evident that *no other general cause except God should be admitted*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Cfr. Descartes' *Principles*, II, 29. Curley vol. I, page 263-4.

<sup>68</sup> Curley vol. I, page 276.

P13: God still preserves, by his concurrence, the same quantity of motion and rest he first imparted to matter.

Dem.: Since God is the cause of motion and rest, he still preserves them by the same power by which he created them (by IA10), and indeed in the same quantity in which he first created them (IP20C), q.e.d.

Schol: ... 2) Although motion is nothing in the matter that moves but a mode of it, nevertheless it has a determined quantity...Read *Principles*, II, 36.<sup>69</sup>

In *Principles of Philosophy*, II, 37, Descartes identifies the *particular* causes of motion with ‘certain rules or laws of nature’ which can be known from God’s immutability. These are:

- Each and every thing, insofar as it can, always continues in the same state. (PP, II, 37);
- All motion is in itself rectilinear; and hence any body moving in a circle always tends to move away from the centre of the circle which it describes. (PP, II, 39.)
- If a body collides with another body that is stronger than itself (it is deflected and) it loses none of its motion; but if it collides with a weaker body, it loses a quantity of motion equal to that which it imparts to the other body (PP, II, 40).

Spinoza discussed Descartes’ laws of motion, in terms equivalent to Descartes’, in P14 to 20. As Curley notes in his edition of Spinoza’s works,<sup>70</sup> there is an interesting omission: Spinoza

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<sup>69</sup> Descartes explains quantity of motion in terms of the speed and size of the transferred body; so does Spinoza (see II Cor 3 to P22). Curley vol. I, page 276-7.

<sup>70</sup> The remark is in a footnote to Scholium to PP II, P 11 (p. 276)



drops Descartes' identification of laws of nature with secondary causes. This strongly supports the thesis that Spinoza interprets Descartes as holding that only God is a cause.

Spinoza's propositions demonstrating Descartes' laws of motion refer constantly to God's immutability and concurrence:

P14 (Law 1) Demonstration: Since nothing is in any state except for God's concurrence alone (IP12) and God is supremely constant in his work...

P15 (Law 2) Demonstration: Because the motion *has only God as its cause* (P12), it never has any power to exist of itself (IA10), but is as it were created by God *at every moment*... Hence, so long as we attend only to the nature of the motion, we shall never be able to attribute to it... a duration that can be conceived to be greater than another...<sup>71</sup>

P18 (Law 3) is demonstrated through P13, therefore again on the nature of God.

So, Spinoza's discussion ascribed to Descartes the position that God is both general *and* (derivatively) particular cause of change. This is supported by the discussion of determinism in I P20 and Cor., on which Spinoza founds God's constancy:

P20: God has preordained things from eternity.

Dem: Since God is eternal (P19), his understanding is eternal, because it pertains to his eternal essence (P17 Cor.). But his intellect is not really distinct from his will or decree (P17Cor). So, when we say that God has understood

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<sup>71</sup> Curley vol. I, page 277-8.

things from eternity, we are saying at the same time that he has willed or decreed them so from eternity, q.e.d.

Cor: From this Proposition it follows that God is supremely constant in his works.<sup>72</sup>

*Metaphysical Thoughts* confirms that Spinoza interpreted Descartes as holding that the only real cause is God:

... the thing, of itself, *never had any power to do anything or to determine itself to any action*, and that this applies not only to things outside man, but also to the human will itself.<sup>73</sup>

While the problem of determinism in Cartesian philosophy (according to Spinoza's exposition of it) will be discussed more extensively later, so far we have good evidence that Spinoza read Descartes as denying any form of authentic horizontal causation. God is the only cause of body-body interaction. Motion is a mode of bodies, and it is not to be confused with whatever causes it.

Problems deriving from these ideas will be addressed more specifically in later sections. However, let me anticipate them. One is the problem of how is it possible to distinguish particles of matter prior to motion. Spinoza left the problem unsolved, as well as the problem of particulars in general (extended and thinking).

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<sup>72</sup> Curley vol. I, page 261.

<sup>73</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II, ch. 11; Curley, vol. I, 339.

Another aspect that Spinoza was happy to stress is how problematic it is to add a causally active and free mind to a picture in which only God is cause. We know Descartes was certainly aware of this problem.

## 2.2 THE NATURE OF THOUGHT AND REPRESENTATION

Descartes' initial 'skepticism' strategy, as we have seen, inserts a wedge between the psychological characters of certainty of an idea, including mathematical ideas, and its truth. The importance of the *cogito* is that it shows the mind what a true idea 'looks like', so that the cognizer will not doubt any more when she has an idea with those characters. However, the existence of God is necessary for the conclusion that 'clear and distinct' are reliable marks of truth for other ideas.

A true idea is that which represents its object as having those properties that the object has *formaliter* (see *Meditation 5*). Ideas that are neither extended nor shaped are cognized as 'being about' extended and shaped things, but we do not really know how. Ultimately, the reason we are justified in believing that what we conceive as being extended and shaped is indeed extended and shaped is the presence of a non-deceiving God.

While Spinoza did not discuss Descartes' account of representation in detail in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (the only exception is the idea we have of God, which is used to prove the existence of God: more on this later), we have some evidence from other texts that he had serious problems with Descartes' use of God as a causal *factotum*. This text, from *Ethics* V, Preface, is not immediately related to the problem of representation (it is directed in particular against Descartes' *The passions of the soul*), but its relevance will be shown shortly.

In discussing Descartes' opinion on the mind-body union, Spinoza wrote:

What, I ask, does he understand by the union of the mind and the body?

What clear and distinct idea does he have of a thought so closely united to some little portion of quantity? *Indeed, I wish he had explained this union by its proximate cause. But he had conceived the mind so distinct from the body, that he could not assign any singular cause, either of this union, or of the Mind itself.*

Instead, it was necessary for him to have recourse to the cause of the whole universe, i.e., to God.

Spinoza hits the nail on the head, as we have seen: horizontal causes are not causes proper, and the only efficient cause is God. The discussion targeted by Spinoza here is a series of passages, in *The passions of the soul*, where Descartes explained how, though “each motion of the gland has been connected by nature from the beginning of our life with a particular one of our thoughts,”<sup>74</sup> habit and training can achieve a complete control of the mind over the bodily passions. Here Spinoza is directing the reader's attention to how Descartes used God to cover up explanatory gaps that Descartes' own metaphysical dualism, and incoherent (for Spinoza) use of the concept of causation, had opened. Because there is no account of what originated ideas in the mind, or of what makes them ‘ideas of,’ or of how the body is united to the mind and ideas “brought up” in the mind, Descartes must make use of God in a way that Spinoza exposed as arbitrary and unacceptable. Spinoza concluded his preface to *Ethics* V claiming that he could offer an account of what appears as mind-body interaction that does not violate the basic tenets

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<sup>74</sup> *Ethics* V, Preface; Curley, 595. Spinoza is summarizing Descartes' argument in *The Passions of the Soul*.

of conceptual and causal isolation, which are a consequence (for Spinoza) of the causal principles that Descartes himself accepted: containment and similarity.

While Spinoza and Descartes disagreed on what founds the representational relation between an idea and its object, they did agree on the fact that the idea-object relation is *representational*. The use of the concept of “objective reality” (*esse objectivum*) in all of Spinoza’s works is clearly representational. For an idea Y, having X as its object means *representing X*.<sup>75</sup> As I discussed in the previous part, ultimately Descartes must explain the fact that clear and distinct ideas represent their objects through God. While (as we have seen) Descartes posits a causal relation as the foundation of representational relations between ideas and objects, his concept of causation leaves open the question of how explanatory such causal relation actually is.

Spinoza, on the other hand, rejects explanations based on “acts of God” in favor of explanations based on the nature of things. So in his philosophy, more explicitly in *Ethics*, the representational relation between ideas and their objects is explained by their *being the same mode*. Ideas are *res* expressed under a different attribute. While there are some problems with this, and while it can be questioned whether this is an actual representational relationship in any acceptable sense, it is quite clear that Spinoza intended it this way.

In both Descartes’ own texts, and in Spinoza’s reading of Descartes in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, ideas owe their objective reality to a cause where the same reality is present not objectively, but formally or eminently. In other words, my idea of a horse can be only

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<sup>75</sup> Ideas represent their *ideata*, pace Radner, whose interpretation has been effectively criticized by Della Rocca (both articles in Segal and Yovel, eds., *Spinoza*).

caused by something in which ‘horseness’ is present formally (as in a real horse) or eminently (as in a cause which, though not being a horse, can cause what a horse can cause).<sup>76</sup>

If Descartes held that horizontal causation is causation proper, then he would have a problem explaining mind-body causation because of the similarity principle, and because matter, being inert, cannot causally act on the mind (or on anything else). In other words, in Cartesian philosophy objects cannot be the efficient cause of their ideas, but can only bring them about via God’s recreation. We have seen that Descartes avoided this problem because his concept of horizontal causation is not actual efficient causation, and therefore is not bound by the same causal principles. However, we have also seen that there is at least one text (*Comment on a Certain Broadsheet*) in which Descartes uses the similarity principle to show that ideas cannot be caused by external objects *because they have nothing in common*. This position was endorsed by Spinoza in his own philosophical treatises. While in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* Spinoza simply did not address the issue of how ideas can represent external objects, I find it plausible that, if he had discussed the issue, Spinoza would have interpreted Descartes as holding that representation cannot be explained by a causal action of external bodies on the mind, for the simple reason that Spinoza interpreted Descartes as holding that matter is inert, and moreover that the only *real* cause is God. Therefore, it is not possible to consistently hold that external things have a causal power on our mind which results in our having ideas representing them. The only alternative is that the representative power of ideas is explained through God. Because God contains, eminently and as an exemplar cause, everything that is in our ideas, the causal requirements are satisfied... at least, if one accepts the concepts of eminent and exemplar causation.

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<sup>76</sup> See definition of eminent causation: PPC I, D4 and Ax. 9.

However, the following passage from *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* I, P21 creates a problem for the above interpretation:

Now we perceive clearly and distinctly (as everyone finds in himself, insofar as he thinks) that extended substance is a *sufficient cause* for producing in us pleasure, pain and similar ideas, or sensations. These are continually produced in us, even if we are unwilling. But if we wish to feign some *other cause of our sensations, beyond extended substance*-say, God or an angel- we immediately destroy the clear and distinct concept that we have. Hence, so long as we attend rightly to our perceptions, so that we admit nothing but what we perceive clearly and distinctly, we shall be wholly disposed... to assent that extended substance is the *only cause* of our sensations. Hence we will be wholly disposed to affirm that the extended things created by God exist (my italics).<sup>77</sup>

The language clearly echoes *Meditation VI*. This creates a problem because if “the only cause” is interpreted literally, the passage would be in open contradiction with the many statements in both *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* and *Metaphysical Thoughts* ascribing the only real causal action to God. The reading here follows strictly *Meditation VI*, in which Descartes argues that sensations are indeed caused by external objects, and that they prove the existence of these objects themselves. So, we need to read “only causes” as “only *horizontal* causes,” which is further evidence that Spinoza did ascribe Descartes the kind of theory of causal harmony that I discussed in the previous chapter, where horizontal causation is not real efficient causation (therefore does not have the constraints of the causal principle).

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<sup>77</sup> Curley, vol. I, 261.

As in *Meditation* III, God is no deceiver because of the nature of horizontal causation. While external things are not actual efficient causes, they are still necessary conditions. In other words, in the absence of external objects being in a certain state, we would not have such and such ideas representing them.<sup>78</sup> The main point of *Meditation* VI is that, if we had ideas that make us think that there are bodies, while no bodies existed, then God would be a deceiver. Ideas are triggered, or occasioned, by the presence of a body in a particular state, even if it is God that brings about both the idea *and* the bodily state. In this sense, because both God and the bodily state are necessary conditions, we can speak of *concurrence*, a term often used by Spinoza even when denying that anything but God can be a cause (as in *Metaphysical Thoughts* part II, ch. 11). Both Spinoza and Descartes seem to think that the term “concurrence” applies even when there is no causal power to speak of in created things. The reason is this: while only God has causal power, created things concur in the fact that states of affairs at an instant determine the next state of affairs, even if they do not bring it about. I will have more to say about this in a later section.

Because external things are not actual causes, ultimately representation is grounded on God’s will. Ideas do not represent things through resemblance, or because they are efficiently caused by them; they represent things because God ordered the world in such a way that the presence of the object is a necessary condition for the presence of the idea. We have seen in the beginning of this section that for Spinoza this does certainly not constitute a sound explanation based on secondary causes.

As for the activity of minds, which is not discussed in great detail, Spinoza probably did not find this position consistent. In none of the passages in which he explained the position that

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<sup>78</sup> Unless, as Descartes explains in *Meditation* VI, the sensory organs or the brain are malfunctioning.



God is the only cause, in both *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* and *Metaphysical Thoughts*, did Spinoza make an exception for the thinking substance. As I argued in the previous section, there are reasons to think that mind is subject to the same limitations as matter, even if this conflicts with the mystery of free will.

### 2.3 PARTICULARS

We have seen that Descartes did not discuss the issue of individuation of thinking substances. Obviously, he believed that the existence of a plurality of thinking substances did not need explanation or justification. Indeed, the idea that there are no individual souls (or minds) would clash with both his account based on our first person experience, and with fundamental religious tenets (as we know from the violent reactions of religious writers and the Catholic Church to various forms of mind monism since the Middle Ages, such as Averroes' or Siger of Brabant's). Given that there is a plurality of thinking substances, presumably, these are individuated by their modes. This conflicts *prima facie* with the metaphysical and conceptual priority ascribed to substances, but if Descartes privileged the epistemic point of view (as he evidently did in some discussions) then the problem does not really concern him.

In the case of bodies, the situation is even less clear. While discussions about "his own body" and the intimate nature of the mind-body union seem to commit Descartes to a plurality of really distinct bodies, he lacks a clear and non-circular criterion of body individuation. As seen in the previous chapter, texts do not really help. In Part I of *Principles* Descartes stated that there is a *real* distinction between parts of the extended substance, i.e. (by definition of "real distinction"), the parts constitute a plurality of substances. However, the real distinction is based

on having different modes, in particular (as per *Principles* II, 23) different patterns of motion. This, again, is metaphysically unsound, and does not tell us how even God could tell bodies apart before he imparts motion at each moment the world is recreated.

As we know from texts such as *Short Treatise*, when he composed the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza already believed that there are no particular substances: there are particular modes, each of which “expresses” the divine substance under some attribute, and is not ontologically independent from all the other modes. In other words, Spinoza denied that there is a plurality of substances. However, in his rendition of Descartes’ philosophy, Spinoza recapitulated the discussion of particular bodies in his discussion of local motion which I quoted in a previous section. In this discussion, bodies are ‘individuated’ by their motion; or, *one body* is what is transferred by a single motion from the vicinity of some specified bodies to the vicinity of others.

Descartes stated in *Principles* that the distinction among bodies *when clearly and distinctly perceived* is real, i.e. that they constitute different substances. A passage in *Metaphysical Thoughts* shows that Descartes’ position was correctly reported by Spinoza:

That distinction is called real, by which two substances are distinguished from one another, whether they have the same or different attributes, e.g. thought and extension, *or the parts of matter*. This is known from the fact that each can be conceived, *and consequently can exist*, without the aid of the other.<sup>79</sup>

It is interesting to notice that in *Ethics* I P 15, Spinoza criticized Descartes on the grounds that holding a plurality of extended substance and rejecting a vacuum is inconsistent. If parts of

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<sup>79</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, V; Curley, I, 323.

matter can be conceived without each other, then it is conceivable that a part be annihilated; but then, a vacuum would follow, which Descartes rejected.<sup>80</sup>

Spinoza's discussion, however, is not fully consistent. In *Metaphysical Thoughts*, here is how Spinoza argued for a divine creation of individual souls, and rejected the hypothesis that minds are generated by a transmission process.<sup>81</sup>

It is sufficiently certain that it is not by transmission (*that minds are created*). For that occurs only in things which are generated, i.e. in the modes of some substance. *But substance itself cannot be generated*; it can only be created by the Omnipotent alone, as we have proven fully...<sup>82</sup>

So, the condition for having a plurality of substances of the same kind (thinking or extended) is that God creates each and every one of them, because created substances cannot produce substances. In other words, God is not only cause *secundum esse*, but also *secundum*

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<sup>80</sup> In the Scholium to *Ethics* I, P15 Spinoza cryptically refers to an argument against vacuum that he offered 'elsewhere'. While it is generally accepted (included in Curley's footnote, but also in Bennett's *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*) that the reference is to *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Tad Schmaltz offers interesting reasons to think otherwise in his "Spinoza and the Vacuum." Schmaltz suggests that the reference is to Spinoza's *Letter on infinite* to Meyer. For reasons that I cannot summarize here, I think that Spinoza refers to an argument offered in a footnote to *Short Treatise*, I, chapter 2 (Curley, page 71).

<sup>81</sup> The idea was that souls were created through some sort of propagation from the soul of one or both parents. Heerebord held this position in *Pneumatica*.

<sup>82</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, XII; Curley, I, 341.

*fieri*. In this passage, Spinoza clearly ascribed to Descartes the idea that what may appear to us as a plurality of extended substances (including living bodies) are simply modifications of one substance, while there is a real plurality of thinking substances, each directly created by God. This calls to mind the analogous claim made by Descartes in the Synopsis to the *Meditations*;<sup>83</sup> except that Descartes never made the claim that each individual (extended) substance must be created by God. Did Spinoza interpret Descartes as holding a form of monism regarding extension and pluralism regarding thought? Certainly, Spinoza believed by this time that substance cannot be generated, and that it can only be caused by God (i.e. by itself).

The discussion of the mind-body union is also relevant to the question of substance pluralism. Spinoza's discussion of the mind-body union problem in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, part of which has been quoted in the previous section, is synthetic, and does not reflect Descartes' language of "substantiality" and "informing" that we find especially in Descartes' letter to Mesland.<sup>84</sup>

P21: Substance extended in length, breadth and depth really exists; and we are united *to a part of it*.

Dem: the extended thing, as we perceive it clearly and distinctly, does not pertain to God's nature (by P16), but can be created by God ((by P7 and P8). Now we perceive clearly and distinctly (as everyone finds in himself, insofar as he thinks) that extended substance is a sufficient cause for producing in us pleasure, pain and similar ideas, or sensations...

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<sup>83</sup> Descartes, Synopsis to the *Meditations*; CSM II, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to Mesland, Feb. 9, 1645; CMS, III, 243.

Next, we observe that among our sensations, which must be produced in us by extended substance... there is a great difference, viz., when I say that I sense, or see, a tree, and when I say that I am thirsty or in pain. But I clearly see that I cannot perceive the cause of this difference unless I first understand that I am closely united to one part of matter and not to others. Since I understand this clearly and distinctly and cannot perceive it in any other way, it is true that I am united to one part of matter...<sup>85</sup>

Notice that Spinoza avoided mentioning the substantial union; besides, he wrote of a ‘part’ of matter, as if he wanted to avoid committing to a plurality of extended substances. We know from *Short Treatise* and his earlier correspondence that by 1663 Spinoza had already developed his objections to the notion of a real form of mind-body union. *Short Treatise* also shows that Spinoza was already opposed to the idea that there can be finite substances. While a plurality of thinking substances was posited, rather than argued for, and justified on religious, rather than philosophical, grounds in the discussion in *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza seemed to follow Descartes’ own ambiguity regarding a plurality of extended substances.

The problem seems ever more urgent in the case of a plurality of thinking substances. What can ground the real distinction between thinking substances? Descartes’ only possible basis for such distinction is our perception of our mind as different from other minds, which, he seems to think, constitutes sufficient and unproblematic evidence. No metaphysical argument is given to justify and explain such plurality, and no explanation is given of what distinguishes thinking substances from one another (or what distinguishes the “I” of *Meditations* from other “I”). The Scholastics held that substantial forms found real distinctions, but Descartes rejected this

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<sup>85</sup> *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, 21; Curley, 261.

solution. He may have thought that God knew the differences, that God's positing different essences for different thinking substances (one essence for Britney Spear's soul, and a different one for mine) is a sufficient explanation. However, this begs the question of what exactly it is that makes these essences different, except for being thinking substances having different modes. Once again, Descartes' rejection of substantial forms in favor of a 'skinnier' metaphysics left gaps for other philosophers to see.

## 2.4 THE PROBLEM OF CAUSATION

In this section, I will show more extensively how Spinoza ascribed to Descartes two specific positions, only one of which is (albeit implicitly) endorsed by Descartes: determinism and the idea that only God has causal powers. I will also show how Spinoza exploited Descartes' use of eminent causation to support his conclusion. In other words, Spinoza showed that from Descartes' description of the relationship between God and the world in terms of utter dependence and eminent causation, it must follow that everything is necessary, that such necessity depends on God, and that no causal action is possible on the part of created substances.

We know, from Spinoza's writings contemporary to, and preceeding, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, that Spinoza was constructing a philosophy where naturalism, immanence and determinism were central ideas. I find it persuasive to think that Spinoza, in writing *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, had his own agenda which went beyond simply explaining Descartes. It seems clear to me that Spinoza wanted to salvage those parts of Cartesian metaphysics which he found valid (e.g., the endorsement of the mechanical philosophy, the real

distinction between extension and thought<sup>86</sup>), and show how incoherent it would be to add to these parts metaphysical tenets that, for Spinoza, were simply baggage due to a religious tradition that he did not share. While plenty of readers, during Spinoza's time (and today) would have been satisfied with endorsing an incoherent tenet such as the freedom of the will, or the rejection of determinism, because it was a "mystery" of religion, Spinoza counted on the possibility that the most perceptive readers would have questioned those very tenets in the name of good reasoning.

While I committed myself to a certain interpretation of Descartes's position on horizontal causation and concurrence, the jury is still out on how ultimately Descartes conceptualized causation. Spinoza never explicitly discussed what it means for something to *cause* something else, but his discussion in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* contains endorsements (more or less explicitly) of the causal principles described in the previous section.

God fills up many roles in Descartes' account of causation. We have seen that Descartes' discussion of extension and motion allows one to conclude that Descartes denied any real efficient causation to created substance. While Descartes defended mind-body causation, which conflicts with the similarity principle, I explained in what sense the causal principles do not

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<sup>86</sup> Of course, in Spinoza's metaphysics, real distinction does not mean substantial distinction. See Deleuze's *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza*, where Deleuze discusses how, in Spinoza, real distinctions are not numerical, and numerical distinctions are not real.

apply to statements about horizontal causation.<sup>87</sup> God is ultimately the total efficient cause of everything that happens, because he contains it eminently.

We will see that Spinoza rejects the notion of eminent containment, in both *Short Treatise* and *Ethics*. However, in both *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, and in *Metaphysical Thoughts* Spinoza defines and uses the notion. Here is an extremely important passage from *Metaphysical Thoughts*:

That creatures are in God eminently

1. That God contains eminently what is found formally in created things, i.e. that God has attributes in which all created things are contained in a more eminent way. See IA8 and P12C1. E.g., we conceive extension clearly without any existence, and therefore, since it has, of itself, no power to exist, we have demonstrated that it was created by God<sup>88</sup>. And since there must be at least as much perfection in the cause as there is in the effect, it follows that all the perfections of extension are in God. But because we saw afterwards that an

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<sup>87</sup> It could be explained that the mind can causally act on the body because it is ontologically superior, even though different. Eminent causation would apply. However, there are two problems with this argument. Firstly, it is incompatible with body over mind causal action, and Descartes insisted that this occur until the end of his life. Secondly, it is important to notice that Descartes never used eminent causation to explain the mind's action on the body; rather, in the already quoted letter to Mesland, Descartes questioned the applicability of eminent causation to finite causes. So, eminent causation does not apply to mind-body interaction.

<sup>88</sup> Compare to *Short Treatise*, chapter 2, with the argument ascribing extension to God.



extended thing is, by its very nature, divisible, i.e., contains an imperfection, we could not attribute extension to God (Ip16). So we were constrained to allow that there is some attribute in God which contains all the perfections of matter in a more excellent way (IP9S), and can take the place of matter.<sup>89</sup>

This, in a nutshell, is the rationale for eminent causation: one is, as Spinoza effectively puts it, *constrained* to accept the notion of eminent containment and eminent causation, in order to explain how God can be cause of imperfect things without actually containing any imperfection. Notice as well how explicit Spinoza is about the containment principle. While Descartes never went so far as to claim that God contains eminently *all* created things, Spinoza spelled out the main implication of the *nihil ex nihilo* causal axiom: God must have contained, somehow, every single thing he created.

Let's get back to the axioms in which Spinoza states what containment is: axiom 8, introduced, with another group of axioms, as "Axioms taken from Descartes."

Whatever *reality, or perfection*, there is in any thing, exists formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause.

I understand that the reality is in the cause eminently when the cause contains the whole reality of the effect *more perfectly* than the effect itself, but formally when it contains it *as perfectly*.

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<sup>89</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II; Curley, 303-4 (My italics).

This axiom depends on the preceding one.<sup>90</sup> For if it were supposed that there was either nothing in the cause, or less in the cause, than in the effect, then the nothing in the cause would be the cause of the effect. But this (by Ax. 7) is absurd. So not anything can be the cause of the effect, but only that in which there is every perfection that is in the effect, either eminently or at least formally.

Let's try to spell this out by looking deeper in Spinoza's use of "reality" (*realitas*) and "perfection" (*perfectio*), to see what kind of constraints, if any, he may have placed on the notion of eminent containment.

The language in axioms 4 and 8, and in lemma 1, of the first part of *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* shows that Spinoza used the terms "reality," "perfection" and "being" (*esse*) interchangeably (I will only give partial quotes, since these axioms have been quoted above):

A4: There are different degrees of *reality*, or *being*: for a substance has more reality than an accident or mode... For we know how *much reality or perfection* the idea of a substance...

A8: Whatever *reality or perfection* there is in any thing...

Lemma 1: ... *By perfection I understand only reality or being*. E.g., I perceive that more reality is contained in substance than in mode or accidents.

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<sup>90</sup> Axiom 7: "No actually existing thing and no actually existing perfection of a thing can have nothing, or a thing not existing, as the cause of its existence." An explicit statement of *nihil ex nihilo*. Curley, 244.

Hence I understand clearly that it contains a more perfect existence than accidents do...<sup>91</sup>

Lemma 1 proves that the more perfection something has, the more necessary its existence. Less perfect things have a lesser claim to existence because they are closer to nothingness, which has no possibility of existence. Moving away from nothingness, beings come to possess more and more ‘ability’ to exist. This quantitative concept of ability to exist has something to do with what something’s existence is dependent on: if it depends only on God, then this something is a substance, with more reality and perfection than a mode, which depends on the existence of a substance to exist.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, L1. Curley, I, 252 (my italics).

<sup>92</sup> Ramond, in his "Degrés de réalité" et degrés de perfection" dans les *Principes de la Philosophie de Descartes de Spinoza*," argues that Spinoza’s examples are problematic for his equating degrees of perfection to degrees of reality. In the book example, Spinoza argued that the cause of a deep philosophical book must be “more perfect” than the cause of a trivial book (say, a romance novel). But, Ramond argues, in the example “perfection” is a value judgment. It cannot be the case that, just because an author is less of a deep thinker than another, the former author has “less reality” than the latter; unless we ascribe Spinoza a notion of perfection as closeness to an ideal of human nature which was common in the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition (where the stupid and ignorant man has less “human reality” than the educated genius, because the former has less actualized human potential), but which Spinoza openly and consistently rejects in all his works and letters. So, Ramond concludes, Spinoza contradicted himself with his

This concept is also used in Spinoza's definition of being, in the opening section of *Metaphysical Thoughts*, I.

Let us begin therefore with Being, by which I understand whatever, when it is clearly and distinctly perceived, we find *to exist necessarily or at least to be able to exist*.<sup>93</sup>

Later on, Spinoza specifies the meaning of the being of existence (or, what it is to exist):

Finally, Being of existence is the essence itself of things outside of God, considered in itself. It is attributed to things after they have been created by God.<sup>94</sup>

The quantitative concept of perfection, or reality, is also used in deciding what imperfection is. For example, divisibility is considered imperfection (in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, P17) because it involves the existence of parts that are prior to the divisible substance. Because the divisible substance's existence depends on the existence of its parts, it is less perfect (less "able to exist") than an indivisible substance. The same reasoning is used to show that unchangeable substances are more perfect than changeable: change presupposes parts, and therefore dependence.

This digression was necessary to show that, even spelling out all the terms that are used in Spinoza's definition of eminent causation or eminent containment, both concepts are quite

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own examples. While I agree with Ramond that Spinoza's choice of example is questionable, I think that Ramond takes the examples at face value, something Spinoza may not have intended.

<sup>93</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, I Curley, I, 299.

<sup>94</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, I. Curley, I, 304.

vacuous, and do not seem to give any account above and beyond the idea of “containing more reality or perfection than the effect.” If, as I suggest, Spinoza’s account in terms of “degrees of perfection” must be interpreted in terms of ontological independence (how much something depends on for its existence), the issue does not become clearer, because traditional judgments of perfections, in terms, for example, of capabilities or complexity (Albert Einstein is more perfect than an amoeba) do not map into this idea. In other words, it does not seem the case that Einstein is more “ontologically independent” than an amoeba, or has more “reality.”<sup>95</sup>

We know that Spinoza consistently rejected judgments of perfection based on the distance from some ideal. Descartes did not reject them. So, Descartes had another question to answer: is it the case that something that is more perfect can cause anything that is less perfect than itself? We know that neither Spinoza nor Descartes would have accepted this. Descartes explicitly stated, in a letter to Mesland of May 2, 1644 (previously quoted), that, while it is true of God that he can cause *any thing*, it is not true of a finite, limited cause.

The crucial difference, for Descartes, seems to lie in the fact that God is an *unconditioned* cause, i.e. has no limitations by nature, is not determined by something else, which can be a source of limitations. Created things, on the other hand, have been, well, *created* by God, and have inherent limitations because of their status as created beings as opposed to pure being.<sup>96</sup> As

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<sup>95</sup> Ramond, "Degrés de réalité" et degrés de perfection" dans les *Principes de la Philosophie de Descartes de Spinoza*."

<sup>96</sup> The whole argument for conservation is based on the fact that, because created things are not pure being, they cannot even exist unless God actively conserves them. See discussion on Descartes in previous chapter, and on Suárez in the next.

I argued, this passage helps make the case that Descartes did not hold that created things have any causal powers. Still, the distinction does not shed any light on the notion of eminent containment.

So far, I have shown that Spinoza's discussion of eminent causation is an accurate report of Descartes' own discussion and use of these terms, and plagued by the same problems. As I will show now, Spinoza used the concept of eminent causation to strengthen his argument for determinism. The case for determinism was sufficiently made by Spinoza showing that, according to Descartes, created things do not have any causal power, and that therefore everything is predetermined by God. However, in his remark that every single thing is eminently contained in God's attributes,<sup>97</sup> Spinoza added something to his argument: he made explicit the Cartesian implication that nothing (no substance, no mode) can be brought into reality, unless it was contained (eminently) in God. This remark is very important, because it can be interpreted as some sort of 'conceptual baby step' towards Spinoza's own concept of immanence. For Spinoza, everything is contained in God, not eminently, but *really*, as a mode of the only substance. While Spinoza already endorsed monism and immanence, it is plausible that he wanted to bring a reader to see how the idea that God contains all of reality was not so outlandish. We will see in the next chapter that Suárez held a similar position.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II; Curley, vol. I, 303-4.

<sup>98</sup> As Lennon pointed out, the notion of eminent containment, if pushed, brings very close to pantheism. We have seen that Descartes did not really 'push' it, but Spinoza did.

The premise for the determinism argument is rejecting that created things have any form of authentic causal power, which Spinoza does in several passages from *Metaphysical Thoughts* and from *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*:<sup>99</sup>:

So, no created thing does anything by its own power, just as no created thing has begun to exist by its own power. From this it follows that nothing happens except by the power of the cause that created all things, namely God, who produces all things at each moment by his concurrence...

As for the freedom of the human will (which we have said is free, IP15 Sch), that also is preserved by the concurrence of God, *nor does any man will or do anything but what God has decreed from eternity that he would will and do*. How this can happen and human freedom still be preserved is beyond our grasp.<sup>100</sup>

As in Descartes, the use of the term “concurrence” (*concursus*) in Spinoza does not imply that he is ascribing any causal power to created things.<sup>101</sup> What Spinoza meant is that what happens at time  $t_2$  is determined by God’s causal power *and* by what was the state of affairs at  $t_1$ . While the state of body A at  $t_1$  will determine what its state (and the state of bodies interacting

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<sup>99</sup> Other passages, quoted in previous sections: *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II, ch. 7; Curley, vol. I, 328; *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, P20 and Cor; Curley Vol. I, 261.

<sup>100</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, I, 3; Curley, Vol. I, 308-9. The last sentence echoes Descartes’ own in *Principle of Philosophy*.

<sup>101</sup> We will see how problematic the causal role of created things is in Suárez’s discussion of concurrence.

with it) will be at time  $t_2$ , this gives A a causal *role* as a necessary condition, not as causal *power*. At each moment in time, the state of the world at the previous instant and God's causal power jointly determine what happens. So, created things do determine what happens next; however, when conceiving of efficient causation as *the power to bring about*, involving the similarity and containment causal principles, horizontal causation is not causation proper. Because, as Spinoza made very clear, it is God who determined the state of the world at each instant, we can indeed say that he is the only efficient cause, or the only being endowed with causal powers.

Things get a bit more difficult, however, when one looks at Spinoza's discussion of free will. Interestingly, Spinoza uses the causal axiom *nihil ex nihilo* to argue against free will: an action caused by free will amounts to an uncaused event, thus violating the axiom. Spinoza pointed out that "freedom" in the sense of lack of predetermination is the equivalent of causelessness.<sup>102</sup> In fact, either "free" is the equivalent of "self-determined," or determined by the prior state of the mind itself (as in Spinoza's later philosophy), or free events are literally uncaused, which is absurd (a violation of *nihil ex nihilo*).

Descartes' strongest argument for freedom of the will, and mind-on-body causation, in his letters to Elizabeth and Arnauld,<sup>103</sup> is our first-person experience. We know that, by this time, Spinoza had already vigorously argued that the first-person experience is deceptive, and therefore it does not constitute acceptable evidence against determinism. It is plausible that the real goal of Spinoza's discussion in *Metaphysical Thoughts* was to make the reader come to the conclusion that the contradiction between freedom of the will and determinism (in favor of

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<sup>102</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Ch. 13.

<sup>103</sup> See previous chapter.



which Spinoza had been piling up arguments in the preceding sections) is a moot problem, because freedom of the will is simply the result of human delusions and ignorance of causes. Meyer's preface to *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* had already drawn the reader's attention to the fact that Spinoza's position on free will was opposed to Descartes':

... If men understood clearly the whole order of nature they would find all things just as necessary as are all those treated in Mathematics... Accordingly, we must say either that God can do nothing, since all things are really necessary, or that he can do all things, and that the necessity we find in things has resulted from the decree of God alone.<sup>104</sup>

Everything that is created is necessary, and the source of this necessity is God's will. However, because of the argument from God's simplicity, God's will is not distinct from God's power.<sup>105</sup> So, what God decreed and what God caused to exist are one and the same. There is no prior decision-making process. There is no choice between different possibilities, as in the Leibnizian system, where God picks the 'best' among possible worlds all aspiring to existence.

Ultimately, the necessity of things lies in the fact that God *contains* in himself *eminently* all and only what was created. Notice how Spinoza used eminent containment and God's simplicity, two notions that Descartes accepted, to introduce what Descartes had explicitly rejected:

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<sup>104</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II, 9; Curley Vol. I, 332.

<sup>105</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II, 8 and 9; *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, I, P20 and Cor; Curley Vol. I, 261.

...Since nothing happens except for the divine power alone, it is easy to see that, whatever happens, happens by the power of God's decree and his will. But since in God there is no inconstancy or change... *he must have decreed from eternity that he would produce those things which he now produces.* And since nothing is more necessary in its existence than what God has decreed would exist, it follows that a necessity of existing has been in all things from eternity. *Nor can we say that those things are contingent because God could have decreed otherwise.* For since in eternity there is no when, nor before, nor after, nor any other affection of time, *it follows that God never existed before those decrees so that he could decree otherwise.*<sup>106</sup>

We know that Descartes did explicitly reject the idea that God could not have decreed otherwise. While he believed that God's decrees were unchangeable, their content utterly depended on God's free will:

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely, no less than the rest of his creatures... It will be said that if God has established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes, he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' –I make the same judgment about God. 'But his will is free.' –Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In

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<sup>106</sup> *Metaphysical Thoughts*, I, 3; Curley, vol. I, 309.

general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp, but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp.<sup>107</sup>

While these truths are created as unchangeable and eternal, to claim that God could not have decreed otherwise is to claim that there is some sort of necessity to God's operations, which clashes with Descartes' voluntarism, and with the Catholic doctrine he considered himself bound to. So, while Descartes is happy to conclude that the eternal truths are in fact unchangeable and necessary, we are not authorized, from this, to conclude that God willed them necessarily. As a consequence, it is conceivable that God could have decreed otherwise. Descartes also points out, in his response to Mesland (May 2, 1644), that still we must not conceive that in God will, intellect and power are separated, or that God goes through a "decision-making process" pre-creation, during which he decides that it will be necessarily true that  $2+2=4$ . This poses the problem of how could God freely will something (in the voluntarist sense of "freely"), if there is no decision-making process.

In *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza downright rejects as absurd the notion that there could be a 'before' time, during which God made up his mind, and during which things were consistent. The unity of God's intellect and will also makes the idea that there may be a deliberation by God, temporally prior to his decision, problematic.

To sum up, we have seen that, while Spinoza was very critical of the notion of eminent causation in writings that we will examine soon, he was only too happy to use it in his discussion of Cartesian philosophy, in order to push forth a form of determinism in which there was no

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<sup>107</sup> Letter to Mersenne, April 15 1630 (CSM, III, 23). See also letter to Mesland May 2 1644, and Harry Frankfurt's discussion in *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen*.

room for what Descartes considered an unquestionable notion: that of a separate and free will in both God and man.

## 2.5 A THEORY OF SUBSTANCE

In *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, two definitions of substance in general are offered, one in Part I and one in Part II:

D5 (Part I): Everything in which there is immediately, as in a subject, or through which there exists something we perceive, i.e., some property, or quality, or attribute, of which there is a real idea in us, is called substance.

For of substance itself, taken precisely, we have no idea, other than that it is a thing in which exists formally or eminently that something which we perceive, or, which is objectively in one of our ideas.<sup>108</sup>

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D2 (Part II): By substance we understand what requires only the concurrence of God to exist.<sup>109</sup>

Spinoza did not elaborate on the relation between the two definitions, but, as I pointed out in the first part, Descartes' concept of substance reflects both. In introducing the concept of substance as "that which only needs God's concurrence to exist," in *Principles I*, Descartes claimed that the word "substance" is applied equivocally to God and created substances, and that

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<sup>108</sup> Curley, vol. I page 239.

<sup>109</sup> Curley, vol. I page 262.

there is “no intelligible meaning” which is common to God and created things. Yet, in his *Second Set of Replies*, Descartes introduces a second sense of substance, as “that in which something we perceive inheres,” thus introducing a sense in which God and created things *qua* substances have something in common: they are subjects, as opposite to inhering in a subject (which properties do).

In both cases, substance is conceptualized in terms of ontological independence. At the horizontal level, the independence is relative to other created things. Things depend on other things only *secundum fieri*, never *secundum esse*. The causal dependence *secundum fieri*, moreover, is problematized by the fact that created things have no real causal powers, a position that Spinoza obviously ascribed to Descartes.

Descartes’ substance dualism is actually a double dualism: God-created substances, on one hand, and extended vs. thinking substance on the other. The reasons for the former form of dualism are found by Descartes in the inherent limitations and imperfections that we experience in ourselves, and therefore the need for an external and powerful cause of our existence. The reasons for the latter form of dualism are found in the conceptual isolation of extension and thought (each is conceivable in terms of its own attribute, and has nothing in common with the other), and in the powerful, non-deceptive nature of God.

Spinoza reported these conclusions accurately enough. However, in his discussion, as we have seen, created substances become increasingly less ‘substantial’: Spinoza makes explicit the fact that created substances have neither *esse* nor causal activity on their own, in a way that is even more extreme than Descartes. Spinoza here treats free will as an utter mystery,<sup>110</sup> while

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<sup>110</sup> It is only for the purposes of commenting on Descartes’ opinion that Spinoza treats free will as a mystery, incompatible with philosophical reasoning and yet very real (based on

Descartes truly believes in the reality of free will and treats it philosophically: so much so that he used our first-person experience of free will as evidence of mind-body causation (albeit *horizontal* causation). It is easy to see Spinoza's passing reference to free will as a formal homage to a concept that he considered absurd, given its incompatibility with the very nature of created things.

Created substances become truly ontologically 'evanescent.' Even those modes that inhere in them (such as motion) are constantly created, together with substance, and it is unclear whether there is any actual dependence of modes on substances, except for God's creating modes *with* substances.<sup>111</sup> While horizontal causality is still maintained, since God has determined each and every state of affairs of extension and thought from the start, created substances don't really 'explain' what happens to them, themselves or their states.

In Descartes' own philosophy, causation and substance need to be interpreted equivocally. It is because of an equivocal use of the term "causation" that Descartes can afford to say that mind and body interact with each other: because horizontal causation is not the same as vertical causation, it does not have the constraint of the similarity principle. The use of equivocation is necessary in order to make the human experience of a plurality of causally interacting things coherent with the religious constraints involved in what I called the 'keeping the distance' problem. Because of the metaphysical consequences of such constraints, a theory of matter and motion is incoherent; representation is unexplained; individuation is problematic,

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religious orthodoxy). In his own philosophy, the notion of free will is simply the effect of ignorance of the causes.

<sup>111</sup> I will have more to say in the next section on the problem of the nature of the substance-accident relationship.

since particulars cannot be distinguished unless through their modes (which Spinoza saw as a problem: he used this position to prove, in a *reductio*, that there cannot be more than one substance with the same attribute<sup>112</sup>).

Spinoza agreed with Descartes on the need for a metaphysics that could explain what substances do without the Scholastic apparatus of substantial forms. However, as we have seen, in Descartes' metaphysics (interpreted *more Spinozano*) only one substance contains a full explanation of its effects through its own essence and powers: God. If indeed the modern philosopher's agenda was to look for a simpler metaphysics, for a more economic explanation of reality, it makes sense to think of a drastic revision of the Creator/created things dichotomy, and of the "keeping the distance" problem, as a reasonable place to start. Substance monism would eliminate the need for an equivocal interpretation of the concepts of "substance" and "causation," while preserving these terms' explanatory value. A single concept of substance, a single model of causation could explain reality. Spinoza believed that Descartes' philosophy itself pushed towards this direction, if cleaned up of religious constraints.

## 2.6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to read Spinoza's *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* in order to confirm that Spinoza was well aware of those problematic aspects of Cartesian metaphysics I have discussed in the previous chapter. I also mentioned that Spinoza could reasonably see

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<sup>112</sup> Substances that have identical attributes can only be distinguished through their modes; which violates substance's ontological and epistemic priority.

monism as a solution to these problems, which would preserve the most valid aspect of Cartesian metaphysics.

While not all of the discussions are as clear cut as one may wish, and while we could use more texts illuminating Spinoza's early development, we know that Spinoza saw Descartes' system as inconsistent, as will be clearer from the forthcoming discussion of Spinoza's pre-*Ethics* works. He admired Descartes as scientist and philosopher of science. He was ready to endorse Descartes' commitment to a 'skinnier' metaphysics, where a few evident principles would allow a sharp mind to explain the whole of reality, as well as the mechanical philosophy. While no deductive explanation could be available from the first principles to the individual things and events, Spinoza agreed with Descartes that metaphysical principles should be such as to be compatible with the new mechanical philosophy, of which Spinoza was an enthusiastic fan.

However, Spinoza realized that Descartes' system was constrained by elements that had nothing to do with science or philosophy. Descartes' more or less sincere commitment to the doctrine of Catholicism was seen by Spinoza as irrational. There is no reason to think that the fetters of Christianity on Descartes' thought were less irritating to the young Spinoza than the ball and chain of his own Judaism.

Another point in which Spinoza was in serious disagreement with Descartes is the primacy given by Descartes to the first-person experience. Whenever possible, Spinoza questioned the validity of first-person experience, especially in rejecting this argument as a solid reason to believe in free will and in the action of the mind over the body. While I cannot make a cogent case that Spinoza was influenced by Hobbes on this point, I find it plausible that reading Hobbes' objections to Descartes' claims about the idea of God and our experience of free will (in Hobbes' *Third Set of Objections to the Meditations*) left its imprint. While no one at that time



questioned the necessity of a thinker to ‘see things for himself’, to experience the clarity of a deduction and of an idea (Spinoza himself believed that a clear and adequate idea is a sign of itself, and derided Descartes’ stratagem of the methodical doubt), philosophers disagreed on what exactly was experienced as clear and distinct. An analysis of Spinoza’s *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* shows that Spinoza derived the most questionable aspect of Descartes’ philosophy from axioms and definitions that he would not have agreed with. His goal was quite possibly to show that, from such implausible axioms and principle, absurdities and contradictions would follow.

It is time now to investigate how Spinoza moved to a system that could meet his requirements. In particular, Spinoza’s new system would have to be compatible with a robustly mechanistic philosophy of science. It would need a model of causation compatible with explaining phenomena through matter and motion. Notice that when I say ‘mechanistic’ I do not intend strictly corpuscularian: matter in Spinoza is active, though he does not have a concept of force. Spinoza fully approved of the mechanical philosopher’s attitude (exemplified by Robert Boyle, with whom Spinoza corresponded via their common friend Oldenburg<sup>113</sup>) of dispensing

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<sup>113</sup> Henry Oldenburg became the first secretary of the Royal Society when it was formed in 1662. He had been a friend and correspondent of Robert Boyle since the mid-‘50s, and acted as an intermediary between Boyle and Spinoza (whom he had met in Rjinsburg in 1661, and had corresponded with since). It is through Oldenburg that Spinoza obtained Boyle’s work on nitre (*On Nitre, Fluidity, and Firmness*). In his detailed response, Spinoza criticized both method and details of Boyle’s experiments, as well as Boyle’s position on the importance of experiments in natural philosophy. The back-and-forth between Oldenburg-Boyle and Spinoza on the nitre experiments continued until mid-1663.

with real qualities. While Spinoza and Boyle disagreed on how to explain chemical reactions, they agreed on the kind of explanation that was scientifically acceptable. Spinoza even scolded Boyle for looking for empirical evidence for the tenets of the mechanical philosophy, which, for Spinoza, followed logically from basic philosophical axioms (which he will explicate in part II of *Ethics*).

The new philosophy would also need to explain the reality of human intellectual, emotional and political life. It should also, because of Spinoza's preoccupations with human welfare and happiness, help humans gain some perspective and be less prone to passions that make them miserable and easily manipulated. In order to obtain all this, Spinoza was aware that he needed a revision of fundamental metaphysical concepts: God, and God's relation to the world.

In the next section I will explore two authors who, in very different ways, had an influence on Spinoza's philosophy. I will first discuss Francisco Suárez as the paradigm of Scholastic philosophy, whom Spinoza certainly knew through his acquaintance with the Dutch philosophers Franco Burgersdijk and Adriaan Heerebord, both teaching at Leiden shortly before Spinoza's time. My discussion will be necessarily incomplete. Its goal is not to explicate Suárez's own philosophy, but to show that it suffered from the 'keeping the distance' problem. Then I will introduce *Gate of Heaven*, by the Jewish Kabbala scholar Abraham Cohen Herrera. It is my intention to show that Spinoza's concept of expression, which is the basis of his model of causation, was probably inspired by Herrera's discussion of the causal relationship between God (Ein Sof) and the *sefirot*, its emanations. In Herrera as well, because of his commitment to transcendence, we can find the "keeping the distance" problem.

### 3.0 THE “KEEPING THE DISTANCE” PROBLEM IN THE TRADITION

Descartes inherited the “keeping the distance” problem from the Christian philosophical tradition. The question of how a perfect being (or realm of beings) and an imperfect world are related had been asked since Plato’s time. It is not my intention to offer an even partial history of the problem; I am interested in offering a picture of the discussion at Spinoza’s time. In order to do that, I will concentrate on two authors: the Jesuit Renaissance Scholastic Francisco Suárez and the Jewish Kabbalah scholar Abraham Cohen Herrera.

Suárez is a necessary part of this short background discussion, since his *Metaphysical Disputations*, published in 1597 in Spain (and reprinted more than ten times all over Europe in a few years<sup>114</sup>) was not only the most comprehensive discussion of the ‘who’s who and what’s what’ of metaphysics at the time, but also an essential element of a philosopher’s (or theologian’s) education. Suárez’s influence on Descartes’ thought has been discussed by a number of scholars. Because Suárez’s books were included in the philosophy curriculum of any self-respecting school in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is certain that Spinoza came in contact with Suárez’s ideas, if not from reading them himself (we have no evidence for or against that), at least from the discussion of these ideas by the Dutch metaphysicians Franco Burgersdijk and

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<sup>114</sup> Alfred Freddoso, Introduction to his translation of *Metaphysical Disputations* 17, 18 and 19 (*On Efficient Causality*).

Adriaan Heereboord, the former a follower of Scholasticism, the latter a Cartesian critic of it,<sup>115</sup> and from the fact that Herrera refers to Suárez in his *Gate of Heaven*.

In the first part of this chapter, I will briefly discuss how the “keeping the distance” problem affected Suárez’s philosophy, in particular by focusing on the issues of causation at both the vertical and horizontal levels. I will point out that Suárez planted some conceptual seeds that could be used towards a Spinoza-like metaphysics, if one were willing to jettison the Christian conceptual machineries. What I will not try to do is to make the case that Spinoza gathered such conceptual seeds from Suárez directly. I merely make the case that they were, so to speak, in the air, and that certain ideas could be grown from them. In particular, I will show that Suárez’s discussion of the relationship of God’s essence to created things, and his conclusion that the nature of created things is such that they can neither exist nor be causes without continuous

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<sup>115</sup> Both Burgersdijk and Heereboord taught in Leiden, and we have good evidence that Spinoza occasionally attended lectures there. There is disagreement on whether Franco Petri Burgersdijk had a tenable and original philosophical system, as opposed to simply being the “ultimate pedagogue” (as Wiep van Ruler calls him), a teacher who bowed to the authority of the Scholastic masters, especially Suárez. Burgersdijk died in 1635, but his textbooks on logic and metaphysics were still popular long after his death (contrary to his *Collegium Physicum*, an exposition of Aristotelian natural philosophy, who succumbed to the success of Copernican-Galilean cosmology). Heereboord, who was Burgersdijk’s successor as professor of logic and who taught at Leiden until his death in 1661, taught Cartesianism early in his career, even when it was imprudent to do so, because he believed that controversy and dispute are the best tools for teaching philosophy. By the time Spinoza went to Leiden, Cartesianism was certainly present in any philosophy class.

“inflow” (*influxus*) from God, make a Spinozan monism sound like a plausible conclusion (if one were willing to drop transcendence).

In the second part, I will refer to Herrera’s *Gate of Heaven* as a plausible source of inspiration for Spinoza’s concept of causation as expression. While no such term exists in Herrera, we will see that his elaboration of emanationism in the light of such diverse metaphysical contexts such as Scholasticism, Renaissance Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, traditional Jewish scholarship and the kabbalah contains interesting variations on the theme of God’s relationship with the world which (as I will show) is plagued by the “keeping the distance” problem, and at the same time shows a possible way out: once again, in dropping transcendence. I will show that Spinoza’s divine attributes show conceptual elements of Herrera’s *sefirot*, or emanations.

### **3.1 SUÁREZ: THE VERTICAL LEVEL, OR CREATION *EX NIHILO***

Suárez’s discussion of the nature of God is in *Metaphysical Disputations* 30. It is located after the discussion of the nature of the first cause and the relations of creation-conservation-concurrence between the first cause and created things (MD 20 to 22), and after the demonstration that such an infinite, uncreated being must exist (MD 29). MD 30 discusses the nature and perfection of God, insofar as it is accessible with our limited cognitive means.

Because things do not have being in themselves, not only do they need God’s creation to come into existence, but they also need his active concurrence in order to continue existing and to be causally active. While Suárez insisted on the fact that God authentically communicated being and causal power to things, it is obvious that, at the vertical level, things are nothing

without God's continuous intervention, and it is only at the horizontal level that things can have independent being and causal action, at least in some sense. In other words, things are ontologically independent and causally active only relative to each other, never absolutely, or with respect to God.

Creation is defined, traditionally, as causation *ex nihilo*. This, Suárez explained, is in contrast with causation of created things, which is necessarily from some preexisting matter. Only God can bring about things without preexisting matter. However, Suárez warned, creation *ex nihilo* does not mean that somehow God 'extracts' being from nothing. The sense of *ex nihilo* is more limited: it means that where there was nothing there is now being. More appropriately, for Suárez creation is *ex Deo solo* (an expression he did not use). The axiom *nihil ex nihilo* is therefore respected: God brought about things which were eminently contained in himself after there was nothing, not literally from nothing.

Creation, a particular kind of causation, is unique to God because of his status as pure being (as opposed to participating into something else's being) and pure act (as opposed to partly potentiality). Because God is pure infinite act, he is pure infinite power, and can bring about infinite things without the need for an appropriate material substratum. In this sense I like to say that creation is *ex Deo*: it is out of his infinite power, not out of nothingness, that God brings about whatever exists. The same infinite power is needed to prevent created things from elapsing into nothingness. For Suárez, only what is being in itself (i.e. whose essence is being itself) can exist without participating in something else's being. God can create things that are independent only at the horizontal level: he cannot create necessary beings such as himself.<sup>116</sup> This involves

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<sup>116</sup> Or there would be more than one God, which is absurd.

an important consequence: the necessity of God's concurrence in causation, because of the way Suárez defines causation.

God is being in itself, necessary being, and he whose essence is being. From God's essence as being itself, it follows that God is infinitely perfect, pure act, and that whatever is not God has being only insofar as it is *communicated* or *participated* from God. In fact,

... it pertains to the perfection of the first being that it contains every being virtually, or eminently; therefore the first being existing in himself has the power to be the efficient cause of every being that is distinct from himself; therefore, it is repugnant to the perfection and omnipotence of the first being that there be something uncaused, and therefore necessary, besides him<sup>117</sup>

From God's essence it follows that whatever being is not God can be created by God, and is therefore contained eminently in God. The reason lies in the fact that, because God is being itself, it is eminently (or *virtually*, another term Suárez uses) all forms of being, or perfection; and can therefore bring about

... those perfections, which are in God's essence only eminently, insofar as they are in him belong formally to the essential concept of God, as we said above with Augustine and Anselm, that *the creature in God is nothing but the very creative essence*, because certainly the eminence, or eminent perfection, that God has in itself, which is the reason why he is said to eminently contain inferior perfections, is itself essential to the definition of God; hence, also those

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<sup>117</sup> DM 29, sect. 3; II, 56; my translation.

perfections that are formally in God, insofar as they are in God, belong to his essence.<sup>118</sup>

This passage specifies that even those perfections that are in God only eminently belong to his essence: in fact, while they are not *formally* in God the same way they are formally in us, they are formally in God (and therefore they belong to his essence) in a way that is *eminently* the way that they are formally in us. In other words, they are formally in God in a way that allows him to create them the way they are formally in us. A typical example of a perfection that is in God only eminently is matter.<sup>119</sup> The way matter is formally in created substances (for example, as divisible in parts) is incompatible with God, as Suárez discusses at length in DM 30 sect 8 to 26;<sup>120</sup> so, matter must be in God in a way that is eminently, or superior to, the way it is in created bodies. This means that matter is in God only as ‘purified’ of those imperfect aspects that make it formally matter down here. In this extremely limited sense, matter exists in God’s essence, like all the other perfections that exist in God; or, what is matter only eminently is formally in

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<sup>118</sup> DM 30, sect. 4 (“That all attributes belong to God’s essence”); II, 90b-91a.

<sup>119</sup> Suárez in MD 30, sect. 10 uses a different example; i.e. human wisdom (*sapientia*), which is in God *eminenter*, i.e. without the limitations inherent in human wisdom qua human.

<sup>120</sup> The discussion is based on two main arguments: the simplicity of God (incompatible with the composition in matter and form), and the fact that the divine nature is incompatible with the nature of bodies.



God.<sup>121</sup> Suárez's discussion on eminent causation shows that he was very well aware of how such concepts were far from philosophically clear.

The relationship between God and his attributes is interestingly different from the relationship between created substances and their attributes. As we will see in the next section, attributes and powers in created things are considered as accidents, or maybe emanations, of their substantial form or essence, but they are not included in it. In God this is not possible, under penalty of undermining the ontological simplicity considered traditionally a perfection. So, in sect. 6 of MD 30, Suárez specifies that attributes are implicated, as it were, in God's simple essence, and as such can only be confusedly conceived by us:

In fact, the essence is not said to be the reason of the attributes per se, but only according to our way of conceiving; because certainly as we conceive of the essence according to some inadequate concept, adding some *differentia* or at least according to some sort of negative *proprium* of God, insofar as he is the necessary first being by his own essence, from this concept, or from this way of being, we infer that this or that perfection is necessarily to be ascribed to that necessary

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<sup>121</sup> Why did Suárez insist on saying that, as Augustine (quoted in the passage) put it, *creatura in Deo nihil aliud est quam ipsa creatrix essentia*? Because, as he explained shortly below the quoted passage, unless perfections that are in God only eminently are considered as belonging formally to God's essence, the risk is to either ascribe to God a 'layered' essence, or to open it to something finite: both are absurd

being, for the reason, so to speak, that a being in itself requires such perfections.<sup>122</sup>

Just because God's attributes are inferred by us as if they were dependent on his being the first being *a se*, and are conceived by us separately one from the other, or sometimes conceived negatively, this does not mean that there is actually such dependence or conceptual division in God. God's attributes do not depend on his essence, but are one with it, so to speak. This includes, as per the passage above, the perfections that are in God only eminently. This is how Suárez interpreted a *prima facie* risky position, such as Augustine's and Anselm's position that all creatures are 'nothing but' God's own essence.

In Augustine's statement (quoted repeatedly without reference), created things in God (i.e. not qua created substances) were equated with God's creative essence, or God's power. But it follows from the previous statement that God's essence *is* God's power. It is not the case, as we just saw, that God is omnipotent because he is being itself; it is the case, however, that we infer omnipotence from his being *esse* itself, because of our cognitive limitations. A more extensive discussion of God's power and its relations to the other attributes is in sect. 17 of DM 30 ("What can be known of God's power and action with the natural reason"). Briefly, Suárez opposed the idea that somehow God's knowledge is prior to God's power. Suárez did not accept the idea that God's intellect contained possible essences among which God choose what to create.<sup>123</sup> For him (and he was following Thomas Aquinas in this) essences do not have any being prior to creation; being simply *possibilia* does not constitute a form of existence.

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<sup>122</sup> DM 30, sect. 6; II, 94 a-b.

<sup>123</sup> See MD 25, where he argues that exemplar causation is not causation proper.

As a consequence, in his discussion on God's power, Suárez makes it very clear that

God is not omnipotent insofar as he knows everything, but rather he knows everything because he is omnipotent and eminently contains everything; so we said above, with Dionysius, St. Thomas, and others, that God, *understanding himself and his power, knows all possible creatures*; therefore, knowledge of the creatures can be distinguished in reason from omnipotence, and *such knowledge*, qua determined towards creatures, *presupposes in the divine nature*, according to our way of conceiving, *the eminent containment of all the creatures*... And a similar discourse can be offered for the will: in fact, God is not able to create because he wants to, as well argued St. Thomas, and neither is he able to create because he is able to will, *but rather he is able to will to create, because he is omnipotent in execution*: therefore, the will, according to reason, presupposes omnipotence.<sup>124</sup>

Let me summarize the complex picture that Suárez offered, before moving on to his account of creation, conservation and concurrence. God's essence, Suárez argued, contains every perfection eminently; Suárez explicitly accepted the Augustinian statement that God *contains* his creatures in his essence. So, as I said above, God creates *ex Deo*, not *ex nihilo*. Creatures must have been contained in God. Yet, because God cannot have accidents or modes, the creatures must have been his essence itself, not simply 'following' from his essence, with any degrees of separation, as it were. Remember that, for Suárez, God's essence and the attributes that constitute it are a simple, 'monolithic' entity, that our intellect 'splits' because it cannot comprehend it the way it is.

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<sup>124</sup> DM II, 224b.

So, at a pre-creation stage, we are all eminently contained in God. But, as we saw, Suárez rejected the idea that the individual essences of created things are formally contained in God's intellect (as *creabilia*) prior to creation. So, what exactly is contained in God?

Let us go back to a previous section and analyze Suárez's struggle with eminent containment, a concept whose lack of clarity he honestly acknowledged. In MD 30(in sect. 1), a subsection is devoted to explain "What it is for one thing to be eminently contained in another."

Let me quote extensively:

However, what it is for one thing to contain eminently another, or its perfections, is a matter of dispute for the theologians with St. Thomas... Briefly, it must be said that to contain eminently is to have such perfection in a superior way which contains virtually<sup>125</sup> whatever is in the inferior perfection; *which cannot be better explained by us, than by reference to causation or effects*. Hence, all the perfections of creatures, insofar as they are eminently contained in God, are *nothing but the very creative essence of God*... it is however said that the creative essence is eminently everything, insofar as it can communicate those perfections to all the things by itself alone and its eminent virtue. ... We make this distinction, and believe this causal statement to be true, "That which contains certain things eminently, can bring about those things," *but we explain such*

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<sup>125</sup> Briefly, *virtus* is a form of power. To have X's perfection virtually (or eminently) refers also to the power to bring about X's effects, without being X. Thomas defines *virtus* as *potentia operativa* in *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q54.

*containment via its effects, because we cannot explain it more effectively and clearly.*<sup>126</sup>

Ideally, one should be able to explain the nature of eminent causation by reference to some aspects of the cause; and, ideally, one should be able to infer from an analysis of the cause to the effects that the cause contains eminently. However, Suárez admits that, while eminent containment is real and prior to its effect (i.e., it does not consist simply in having the power to cause), he must infer it from the effects. The reasoning is admittedly defective because of the conceptual priority of the cause: to declare that X eminently contained Y *post facto* (i.e. because X, while not being Y, did in fact cause Y) is rightly considered by Suárez far from clear and effective reasoning.

To go back to the picture, Suárez's account of how the essence of God contains its creatures is far from satisfactory. Let us accept his apologies and move on from his assumption that creatures are eminently contained in God. Let us now try to spell out why is it that God can create everything. There are two factors here: eminent containment and omnipotence. Omnipotence in itself should be sufficient without eminent containment. After all, many Christians were happy with thinking that God created *ex nihilo*, without necessarily containing in himself whatever he created. As Suárez himself states in DM 20, an infinite power can bring about things where there were none.

The fact that Suárez insisted on the obscure concept of eminent containment indicates very clearly that he endorsed the containment principle, and the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom. In his discussion of the actual meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*, Suárez implies that not even God could bring about something *ex nihilo* proper: this something must have been contained in God's

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<sup>126</sup> II, 63b.

essence. But this is an interesting statement, because it shows that Scholastic thinkers posited a relation between God and his creatures that is somehow similar to the relation of *expression* that, as I will argue, is a fundamental part of Spinoza's concept of causation. While Suárez insisted that God's action is utterly voluntary, and that the emanation model, insofar as it involves necessity (as in Plotinus) is misguided, God does nothing but bring outside himself what was contained in his essence. In creating, God expresses his power, which (as we have seen) is, at least in our understanding, prior to his will. God wills what he can; and he wills what he wills because of what is contained (virtually, or eminently) in himself.<sup>127</sup>

In an interesting precedent, which Suárez does not quote, St. Thomas added the model of emanation to the model of the artist. In his *Commentary on On the Heavens* (1272-3), Thomas had specified (in arguing against the eternity of the world) that an intelligent and willing agent

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<sup>127</sup> While in DM 30, sect. 6; II, 94 a-b, quoted previously, Suárez denies that there is any real distinction in God's nature which corresponds to the distinction made by our understanding, it is important to point out that Suárez's discussion of *distinctio rationis* may undermine this claim. In MD 7, 4 Suárez defines distinction in reason and quotes as an example of those the distinction we make among God's attributes (I, 251a). However, Suárez adds an interesting disclaimer in sect. 7: that distinctions in reason are not arbitrary, but are somehow grounded in the reality of things, such as the distinction between the species (horse) and the individuals belonging to that species. While species does not have an existence separated from individuals, Suárez concludes, if it did, it would be really distinct from them (252a). It is obvious that Suárez wants to claim that distinctions in reason are not simply man-made, but reflect some state of affairs. The question, which I will not answer, is: does this mean that distinctions of reason between God's attributes, and the conceptual priority of power, have some foundation in reality?

produces not according to his being (i.e., as a necessary consequence of his *esse*, as in the Plotinian model), but according to his understanding and willing the product. This is why, Thomas concluded, a being that is infinite and eternal can bring about a world that is finite, or more generally bring about effects that are different in nature from him (a violation of the similarity requirement). Thomas uses the same argument to explain how, as long as it's an *agens per artem* rather than an *agens per naturam*, a simple being with a single act can bring about a plurality of effects. The question Thomas tried to solve was, how can a plurality of pre-existing ideas be compatible with a simple being such as God?<sup>128</sup> Thomas offered a distinction according to which, while forms exist in a simple and unified way in God's power, they exist as distinct object of knowledge in God's intellect; which does not conflict with the simplicity of God's essence (at least according to Thomas). By introducing the analogy with the artist, Thomas separated the emanationist model from the necessity that followed from it.<sup>129</sup>

However, as we said, Suárez does not accept the idea that God designed in his intellect an order of creation and then created it. It seems that, even though he insists on God's utter freedom of the will, in Suárez God's creation seems to be much more dependent on his essence, on the perfection that he contains. In the above passage, he does state that it is because God intellects himself and what is contained in himself, that he can will to create. While the gap between God's

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<sup>128</sup> Because, according to Thomas, things produce *secundum suam formam*, somehow forms of created things must preexist in God.

<sup>129</sup> See for more details Te Velde's *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*. Thomas was not the first to separate the emanationist model from necessitarianism. So did Maimonides in his 1192 *Guide to the Perplexed*.

essence and creation still exists, and consists in God's will (I will not go into Suárez's discussion of free causation<sup>130</sup>), it seems to me that this picture is closer to the emanationist model than Suárez may have liked.

Let us now look into the relationships of creation-conservation-concurrence, before we move on to horizontal causation. The "keeping the distance" problem is particularly evident when it comes to explain God's role as efficient cause, and at the same time the necessity of conservation and concurrence. Because God is infinitely powerful, he can give being (i.e. efficiently cause) from nothingness: nothing short of infinite power will bridge the gap from absolute nonexistence to existence. So, while the definition of efficient cause (as quoted above) is theoretically the same at the vertical and horizontal level, the way this *esse influere* is performed varies so much that one can reasonably question the use of the same definition of efficient cause. In fact, it seems that neither God nor (*a fortiori*) created causes can actually 'give' being in a way that makes the effect able to exist without a continuous inflow of being from God. It's as if being were loaned by God, rather than given.

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<sup>130</sup> In MD 20, sect. 5 Suárez answers a possible objection to the contingency of creation: if God makes a decision to create at some point, this would involve a change in God's essence. Suárez points out that the 'at some point' must be related to 'to create', not to 'made a decision'. In other words, the correct interpretation of the sentence is "God has *ab aeterno* made a decision to create at some point. Because God's will to create is *ab aeterno* the same, there is no change in God's will. However, one may wonder the will of a being who has always existed with that will is 'free' in any significant sense. In other words, if the will to create has always been in God's essence, it is conceivable that God could not have created?



Another problem lies in a clause of the definition of efficient cause. Suárez's extensive discussion of causation starts out with a distinction between "principle" and "cause," and with the declared goal to find a common definition of causation (he declared himself unhappy with the Aristotelian definition of 'answer to a why question') which, as we will see, has a very important consequence for the history of the concept. Suárez adopted the Thomistic definition of principle as "that on which something depends."<sup>131</sup> Causation qualifies as a form of principle: in particular, Suárez stressed that the unique character of causation (as opposed to other principles, such as reasons-*rationes*<sup>132</sup>) lies in its being that *extrinsic* principle that, in itself, "inflows being in something else."<sup>133</sup> Suárez specified that 'inflow' is not to be taken literally, but rather as a metaphor for "communicates," or more generally "gives."

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologica* I p q33.

<sup>132</sup> For an extensive discussion on the development of the '*causa-ratio*' relationship, see Carraud's *Causa sive Ratio*.

<sup>133</sup> DM 17, 1; I 582b. As Freddoso points out, giving *esse* is not restricted to the *esse* of substances, but includes bringing about accidental forms, i.e. any kind of change. "According to St. Thomas, *esse* is a principle of actuality of perfection, where the notion of perfection is broadly construed to encompass any sort of positive determination or 'form', including active and passive causal powers and the entities that come to exist through the exercise of such powers. So giving *esse* entails giving perfection of some sort or other..." from "God's General Concurrence With Secondary Causes: Why Conservation Is Not Enough."

It is important to see that the causation relation is composed of two conceptual elements:

- The *esse influere* part, and
- The *in alio* part.<sup>134</sup>

Suárez specified that the being of the effect is *distinct* from the being of the cause. This must also be true of God and whatever he brings into being. However, the notion of participation makes the distinction problematic, to say the least. God gives being to creatures; however, we know that creatures cannot persevere in being unless God keeps giving, or communicating, or participating, or “inflowing” (*influere*)<sup>135</sup> But if this is so, it is very unclear what *esse* do created things actually have which is separated from God’s.

Suárez offers a convoluted argument to explain why is it that created things need conservation from their first cause, while they do not need conservation from their finite efficient cause. If efficient cause is what gives being, then God gave being to Adam, and Adam gave being to Cain. However, Adam (and Cain) needs God’s conservation to persevere into being, while Cain does not need Adam’s conservation. This is because, as Suárez explains in DM 21,

No effect which receives from the agent form and being *according to the same account which is in the cause* is and depends from that cause *secundum*

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<sup>134</sup> Suárez rejected self-causation: for him, God was uncaused. See Carraud’s discussion in *Causa sive Ratio*.

<sup>135</sup> For example, sect. 1 of DM 21 is entitled “An possit ratione naturali demonstrari entia creata in suo esse semper pendere ab actuali *influxu* primae causae,” “If it is possible to demonstrate through the natural reason that created beings always depend for their being on the actual *inflow* of the first cause.” The answer is affirmative.

*suum esse*, but only *secundum fieri*; otherwise, that effect would involve that cause essentially because of its form; however, this is impossible, because otherwise, since the form of the agent is supposed of the same kind, the same cause would be involved; and therefore it would be self-caused, which is absurd. Therefore it is concluded here that only that agent, which is of a superior account, and which does not communicate its own form or nature to the effect, can be the cause of its effect, not only *secundum fieri*, but also *secundum esse*.<sup>136</sup>

If cause and effect have the same form, or essence, the effect cannot depend on the cause for its being, but *only for its coming to be (fieri)*; otherwise, because cause and effect have the same substantial form, on which efficient causation depends (as discussed in DM 17 and 18), the effect could be said to be self-caused, which is absurd. Suárez quotes an example from Thomas: the sun is the light's efficient cause, and, because the sun is more perfect than the light, the light depends on it not only for its coming to be, but also for its continuing to exist. If the sun withholds its influx, the light ceases to be.

The argument does not really explain why is it in general that things brought into being by causes of a different (and superior) form necessarily need conservation (it only states that it would be absurd for a cause of the same form to be a cause *secundum esse*). However, things become clearer when Suárez reminds the reader that

the *a priori* reason is that only the first cause is being itself in its own essence; every other being is participation in its [the first cause's] being, and therefore it [the created being] postulates by an extrinsic necessity the *influxus* of that which has being in its essence, in order to exist. Which reason not only seems

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<sup>136</sup> DM 21, sect. 1; I, 787-88. My translation.

to prove that God is the cause of his effects directly *secundum esse*, but also that only God can be the cause of everything else in this way, because no being exists from a created cause in such a way, as to absolutely and simply need it in order to receive being; indeed, it is possible to exist from the *influxus* of God alone, but the contrary is not possible.<sup>137</sup>

God is the only being whose essence is being itself. Because everything else exists only insofar as it participates in God's being, or receives being from God, Suárez argues, if God withdrew his inflow of being from creatures, creatures would cease to exist. In fact, it would be impossible for God to create something that could exist independently of God's continuous 'assistance.' In order to do so, God would need to create something whose essence contains being, i.e. something that necessarily exists: and that would be another God, which is impossible.

Because God is the only being whose essence is being, he is the only one who can be absolutely first cause. By this, Suárez meant<sup>138</sup> a cause which is absolutely necessary in order for something to exist. God is the only such cause, because, while nothing can happen without God's causal concurrence (as we will see in the next section), God could single-handedly (so to speak) create everything that, in nature, is created with the cooperation of secondary causes. In an example Suárez himself uses in this section, Cain was caused by Adam and God: however, Adam could not have created Cain without concurrence, while God could have created Cain, if he chose to, without Adam's causal action.

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<sup>137</sup> DM 21, sect. 1, p. 788; my translation.

<sup>138</sup> There is more to the concept of first cause than this; however, I will not examine it in detail, because it would take the discussion too far.

Vertically speaking, therefore, it makes little sense to speak of substances as “what exists in itself,” since nothing can exist in itself besides God. Echoing St. Thomas, but without discussing the use of the term as extensively, Suárez treats the relationship of things to being as one of participation (*participatio*). The concept, of Platonic origin, was not meant to reject transcendence, or to imply that things are ‘parts’ of God, but simply to express the idea that if something has a perfection to a lower degree, it must be because it participates in, or the perfection is communicated to it by, something that has it as its own essence (such as, for Plato, the forms or archetypes). So, for Thomas, things have being and goodness not in themselves, i.e. insofar as it follows from their essence, but only because God gave them being and goodness. “Participation” expresses a relationship of utter essential dependence, while keeping the transcendence. But again, can this transcendence be kept in a consistent way?

It is time now to move on to a discussion of horizontal causation. It will become clear that, despite Suárez’s protestations, it is problematic whether there is such thing as authentic horizontal causation, because of the necessity of divine concurrence. Paradoxically, the only concepts of cause that make sense at the horizontal level are those that, for Suárez, were causes only in a derivative way: formal and material. As far as efficient cause is concerned, horizontal causation exists only in a relative, limited sense.

### **3.2 SUÁREZ: THE HORIZONTAL LEVEL, OR FIRST VS. PRINCIPAL CAUSES**

As we have seen above, in MD 17 Suárez gives the efficient cause a privileged status. The efficient cause is cause in the most appropriate sense, because it is the cause that truly ‘gives being’ to its effect; a being that is new and distinct with respect to the being of the cause.

However, this ‘giving’, or inflowing, of being must occur given certain metaphysical constraints, such as:

- The containment principle
- The preexistence of matter (not just any matter, but matter that contains the form potentially)
- The fact that the cause, being created, has being only insofar as it is conserved by God, insofar as it participates in the being of God
- The fact that (as a consequence of the prior constraint) the cause can only bring about its effects with the concurrence of God
- Finally, the fact that the cause brings about the effect through its powers or accidents, not by directly infusing its own substantial form in the matter.

Suárez describes the process of efficient causation in the physical world in DM 17-19, and in MD 31. In my discussion, I will focus on the efficient causation of a substance (the bringing about of a new substance, as opposed to the efficient causation of accidents, or change). Summing up, a cause brings about its effect in preexisting matter by “educing,” or bringing out, the form that potentially was already existent in the matter. This happens through a series of processes in which the powers, or accidents, of the cause act upon the patient by bringing about powers similar to themselves; these changes create in the patient the appropriate “disposition” for the potential substantial form to become actual. Accidents

effectively induce in the patient those dispositions by which they gradually prepare the matter until the matter becomes proximately fit for the substantial form. And it is in this way that the accidents are instruments for inducing the substantial form -not because they immediately attain to it, or effect it (for their

action ceases and is terminated in the effecting of accidents that are perfectly similar to themselves), but rather because, insofar as they are subordinated to their own substantial form, their action tends toward the production of a similar substantial form.<sup>139</sup>

However, Suárez insists, the powers are only *instrumental* causes of the effect.<sup>140</sup> If the powers in themselves (without the primary causal action of the substantial form) were the principal causes of the effect, there would be a violation of the containment principle: accidents cannot bring about substantial forms, because substantial forms are ontologically superior (and therefore cannot be “contained” in the accidents). As is the case with eminent containment, Suárez cannot explain more clearly in what the causal influx of the substantial form consists: he simply argues that it has to be there, because otherwise a fundamental metaphysical principle would be violated.

So, the causal role of the substantial form of the cause is established, albeit unclearly. The second, important question that Suárez needs to address is how is it that things that have no being of their own can give being to others. The problem was not new: Thomas, among others, discussed it exhaustively, addressing objections to the idea that material objects can have causal

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<sup>139</sup> DM 18, I 599b-600a; trad Freddoso, p. 54.

<sup>140</sup> DM 18, sect. 6: “... acting is analogous to *esse*. But an accident’s *esse* belongs to its substance, since an accident is a being of a being. Therefore, an accident’s acting belongs principally to its substance. Therefore, the acting belongs only instrumentally to the substance.” I, 630 a (trad. Freddoso).

powers, in particular the objections posed by the Islamic sect of the Mutakallimun,<sup>141</sup> who denied that anything besides God could have any authentic causal power. Suárez begins by appealing to a common sense argument: things can give away something that they did not have in themselves. For example, water does not have heat by its essence. Water or metal becomes hot if and only if it receives heat from some external cause: and, once it has been heated, it can give away the heat that it was given (as anyone who drained pasta a little too clumsily would know). So, Suárez concludes, things can receive being from God and give being to other things the same way.<sup>142</sup>

The problem with the analogy is that things are not simply given being by God: they are brought into existence, *and then actively conserved*, because without concurrence they would immediately revert to nonexistence. It is impossible for God to create something that could exist independently of him, even for a finite time. So, *pace* Suárez (and Thomas), there is never an instant in which created things actually ‘have’ being, like water or cast iron ‘has’ heat (even when it is away from the causal action of the fire).

In fact, Suárez argues for the necessity of divine concurrence through the established fact of conservation: so, it is contradictory for him to argue for authentic efficient causation on the part of created things by treating them as if they ‘had’ *esse*.

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<sup>141</sup> Thomas, *De Potentia* q.3, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 105, *Summa contra Gentiles* III.

<sup>142</sup> DM 31, sect. 9; II 259b. “But on the other hand, water is not ascribed heating power per se, and yet truly and properly has the power to heat (*calefacit*), even if it heats through the heat received by an extrinsic agent; therefore the creature, insofar as it exists, truly and per se can bring about existence, even if it has being ab alio.”



Thirdly, one can deduce the same way that created beings do not depend on God less for their being agents, than for their being, because they are no less subordinate to God according to one reason than according to the other, and thus, if they are beings by participation, then thus they are agents...<sup>143</sup>

The argument states that something that is so utterly ontologically dependent on God cannot have any power on its own. It makes sense: something that cannot exist to begin with cannot really have causal powers unless it has them from the cause of its existence (by participation, as Suárez says). But if it is so, Suárez cannot then say that things can ‘have’ being in a way that allows them to give it to others.

Even if the argument for concurrence is based on the claim that things cannot have being in themselves *ever*, Suárez articulates it in a different way. Echoing Thomas, Suárez reminds us that God gave things authentic *powers* to operate. As Thomas argued against the Mutakallimun and their followers on the way to occasionalism, it is much more ‘Godlike’ to give things authentic causal powers than bring about all effects by himself, making it ‘look like’ things were causally active.<sup>144</sup> This latter argument, of course, will be heard again in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries against the Occasionalists. Suárez followed Thomas in arguing that indeed God gave things essences from which there ‘follow’ causal powers (or accidents; more on this soon); however, Suárez specified that from these powers the causal action does not follow *necessarily* and *inevitably*: it follows if and only if God lends his helping hand (so to speak). Of course, God’s concurrence has been preordained and established for the course of nature, and does not

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<sup>143</sup> MD 22, sect. 1.

<sup>144</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles*, III.

involve any *supernatural* intervention, by which Suárez means an intervention above and beyond what these powers would bring about in themselves (if aided by God).

The argument is complex, and at some points irritatingly so. One indeed wonders, reading Suárez, what causal role is left for substances, between the role of their powers (which are the ones *prima facie* doing all the work), and the role of God (which is a necessary condition for these powers to actually carry out their effects). So, let me move a step back and once again look at the big picture, rather than at the single arguments.

Given the metaphysical context in which the created world is utterly dependent on God, it is hard to make the case that things have effects that *necessarily* and invariably follow from their essence. If powers were in the essence, or were necessary emanations of it, then, once the essence is posited, its effects would necessarily follow (unless prevented by an interfering factor). For example, if the power of heating were the essence itself of fire, then fire would necessarily burn.<sup>145</sup> However, there are at least two degrees of separation between a thing's essence and its causal action. Firstly, the active powers of a thing are, in fact, accidents that are related to the substantial form (or essence) in a problematic way.

Essence is defined and discussed in MD 2 sect. 4. Suárez wrote:

In the first sense, we say that the essence of a thing is that which is the first and root, or intimate, principle of all its actions and properties, which are appropriate to the thing, and in this sense it is said to be the nature of any whatsoever thing... In the second sense we say that the essence of the thing is

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<sup>145</sup> Suárez quotes approvingly of Alexander of Aphrodisia's comment to Aristotle: Alexander claims that fire does not heat insofar as it is fire, but insofar as it has the accident of heat (DM 18 sect. 9).

what is explicated by the definition... and thus we also say that the essence of a thing is that which it firstly conceived of the thing... in fact, it is of the essence of the thing that which we conceive to belong to it primarily, and is primarily constituted in its being, or such (*talis*) being, and in this sense we call the essence *quidditas*<sup>146</sup>...

In MD 18, sect. 3 Suárez specifies that the principal principle of efficient causation is the substantial form; it follows then that the essence of a thing and its substantial form coincide. However, being the principal principle of causation does not mean being the power to bring about the effect. Suárez makes it clear that substantial forms are not *per se* active:

In the first place, because the substantial form is not immediately active *per se*, but through its power, which is a quality *distinct* from it..... in fact, we see that any substance, for all its actions, uses accidents, which is true not only of material, but also of spiritual substances; therefore this is a sign that to be at the same time the principal and proximate principle of its own actions exceeds the perfection and limitation of a created substance.<sup>147</sup>

The way accidents inhere to their substantial form is discussed in MD 18:

...that in order for any accident to be intimately and immediately connected to a substance, it does not have to be that it is necessarily connected by effective emanation from the substance, but only through a *natural aptitude and inseparability*, as we said above... and the same way it is not necessary that any

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<sup>146</sup> I, 89b.

<sup>147</sup> MD 18, sect. 10; I, 601b-602a.

accident is immediately emanated by a substance, but that it is received immediately in the substance by the same agent by which the substance is produced.<sup>148</sup>

Accidents, for Suárez, do not follow from the nature of the substance they inhere in, but are simply *co-caused* with it. There are accidents that are constantly brought into being with their substance (such as, for example, whiteness and sweetness in milk), and accidents that are more, well, accidental. So, the power to heat is an accident of fire, but an accident that always comes into being with fire. Moreover, having the power to heat and in fact heating are different. As Helen Hattab writes,<sup>149</sup> for Suárez and Jesuit Scholastics in general causation is an extrinsic denomination with respect to an essence and its accidents: i.e. being causally active is not something that intrinsically changes the cause, but only extrinsically, i.e. in its relation to the other causal relata.

What is relevant here is that Suárez problematized the idea that effects are necessary consequences of the essence of their causes, and that, once posited the latter, the former necessarily follow. While Suárez justifies this position with the distinction between having causal powers and being actually causing, it is unclear to me that the ontological gap between the essence and the causal powers is necessary to solve this problem. Suárez himself specifies that in order for the cause to become cause in act, all that is necessary is for it to meet the appropriate patient. So, it seems to me that one could include causal powers in a thing's substantial form,

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<sup>148</sup> I, 616 a-b.

<sup>149</sup> Helen Hattab, "Conflicting Causalities," in Garber (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*.

since the powers will not be active and ‘perform’ unless the proper patient is present. So, why the ontological gap?<sup>150</sup>

The motivation for this lies, I suggest, in the problem of voluntary actions. If things’ causal actions are a necessary consequence of what they are, then voluntary actions become problematic. Moreover, besides the ‘gap’ between the essence and its powers, there is the gap between a power to bring about an effect, and its actually bringing it about.<sup>151</sup> One may

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<sup>150</sup> “Suppose that all the prerequisite for an agent’s acting are satisfied in a given case. These include the agent’s having a sufficient power to produce a given effect in a properly disposed patient, the agent’s being appropriately situated with respect to the patient, the patient’s being properly disposed to receive the formal determination that the agent is ready to communicate, the absence of impediments, etc. Then, what is the difference between the agent’s acting in such a case and its not acting? The common scholastic adage is that the difference is just the coming to be of the relevant effect in the patient insofar as that effect is dependent on the agent. *So, no new entity need to be added to the agent: instead, the action consists in something being added to the patient.*” Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Pitfalls and Prospects.” Notice that a much simpler ontology would do the job: all one needs here is an agent’s having the appropriate powers in their substantial form, and a patient properly situated. Why the complications, then?

<sup>151</sup> Another possible reason for the gap between a thing and its causal powers could be finding a satisfactory account of miracles. If God, in order to perform his miraculous intervention, had to ‘thwart’ causal powers, it could be seen as a self-contradiction. See Freddoso’s analysis in “God’s General Concurrence With Secondary Causes: Why Conservation

legitimately question what it means for an accident to be a ‘power to bring about X’ if it does not really bring about X, unless helped by God. Suárez, again, argues using examples from everyday experience: a knife has the power to cut, he argues, but does not actually cut unless someone handles the knife.

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Is Not Enough.” The causal gap becomes larger in the so-called *per modum actionis et principii* interpretation of concurrence. According to this interpretation, God’s concurrence occurs by ‘activating’ the powers in the secondary causes, and then ‘concur’ with the cause as it brings about the effect, rather than in simple concurrence (as in Suárez’s interpretation). The former interpretation was defended by Calvinist thinkers such as Voetius, because the alternative conflicted with the Calvinist view on divine grace, according to which there cannot be any ‘cooperation’ on the part of creatures, unless their powers are first activated by God. For Voetius, as well as for Heereboord, who rightly pointed out that, if the cause’s powers are sufficient for their own activation, then they should be sufficient to bring about the effect. Heereboord criticized both Suárez’s and Burgersdijk’s endorsement of the concurrence *per modum actionis* thesis in *Meletemata Philosophica* I, disp 9 (1654). Interestingly, for Heereboord causal powers were *necessary emanations* of substantial form; however, because of his *per modum actionis* concurrence thesis, he eliminated the possibility that effects may follow inevitably from their cause. See also Van Ruler’s “Franco Petri Burgersdijk and the case of Calvinism within the Neo Scholastic tradition,” in Bos and Krop (eds), *Franco Burgersdijk: neoaristotelianism in Leiden*. In their discussion of the influence of Heereboord’s notion of necessary emanations on Spinoza, both Gueroult (*Spinoza*) and Bove (*La Stratégie du Conatus*) fail to keep into account that because of causal concurrence effects are never necessary consequences of their causes.

However, again, there is a problem with Suárez's *prima facie* persuasive analogy. The knife is nothing but an *instrumental* cause: it can never be a principal efficient cause. The same way, the powers to, say, give heat or motion, that are instrumental powers in animal generation, accomplish nothing unless they inhere in their substantial form and, of course, they are 'helped out' by God. Yet, Suárez insistently rejects the hypothesis that secondary causes are only instruments of God, like the knife is the instrument of the butcher; indeed, even in actions that are performed with God's concurrence, the principal cause is the secondary cause<sup>152</sup>. Again, the question is: what does the substantial form really do?

One way to solve this problem is to realize that the substantial form, in a strong way, *determines* the patterns of its accidents,<sup>153</sup> and therefore the concurrent causal intervention of God. For example, the motive and heating powers of a male sheep in generation will perform differently from the powers of a male dog, and they will in turn determine the nature of God's intervention. In other words, the substantial form determines the actual exercise of the causal powers. In this passage, Suárez argues about the "connaturality" of essences and God's concurrence:

This can be said for two reasons, firstly because in concurrence [God] adapts himself (*sese accommodat naturis rerum*) to the nature of things, and

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<sup>152</sup> For a glossary of causation-related terms, see DM17. Briefly, secondary causes are created causes (as opposed to the first cause); principal cause is the one to which the effect is properly ascribed (the butcher, the sculptor), as opposed to the instrumental cause (the knife).

<sup>153</sup> Remember that accidents are brought up together with their substance according to a relationship of appropriateness and convenience.

offers in a unique way his concurrence to their virtue; secondly, because, once decreed to bring about and conserve the secondary causes, he concurs with them by an infallible law in each operation, which law, if we wanted to summarize it, though not assuming a particular and definite [act of] will of God, does not involve necessity, but only, as it were, some sort of duty of ‘connaturality (*non inducit necessitatem, sed solum est quasi debitum quoddam connaturalitatis*).’<sup>154</sup>

Again, Suárez is trying to avoid two extremes: on one hand, the idea that each particular act of concurrence on God’s part follows an individual volition; on the other hand, the also undesirable idea that divine concurrence followed with necessity from creation, i.e. the idea that, once he created, God lost freedom and was bound by his own creation. In Suárez’s view, what binds God is his own immutability and consistency, which do involve some sort of ‘duty’ to adapt his intervention to the nature of the creatures and the powers he gave them.

This seems to conflict with what I mentioned above, i.e. the fact that Suárez tried to place a gap between the essence of things and their effect, to undermine the necessity with which, given a cause of such and such a nature, its effect would follow. This part of MD 22 seems to make the case that essences, once created, do determine what follows from them, including the divine intervention that is necessary in order for these effects to actually occur; however, there is no strong necessity, even though we can, as Descartes would put it, have a moral certainty that, in the course of nature, it will always be the case that God will give fire that additional causal

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<sup>154</sup> DM 22, 4; I, 829b. The argument is echoed in Burgersdijk’s *Institutiones Metaphysicae*, th. 13.



‘oomph’ that it needs to actually burn and heat.<sup>155</sup> There were heated discussions, which I will not report, on how exactly God carries out his concurrence.<sup>156</sup> Suárez’s position was that the secondary cause and God cooperate, i.e. each individually performs its causal action, and the actions together (each independently in its order) bring about the effect.

So, once again, the focus is on the essence, or substantial form.<sup>157</sup> Created essences are an interesting problem in Suárez. They exist and act only insofar as they participate in God’s being and power. Suárez quotes, approvingly, the following passage from Thomas’ *Summa contra Gentiles*:

The first cause... inflows (*influit*) *per se* not only in the effect, but also in the action of the secondary cause: because not only the effect, *but the very action*

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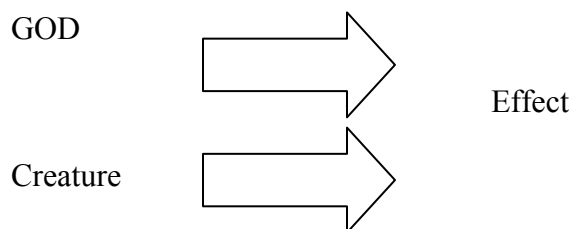
<sup>155</sup> Unless, of course, a miracle is required; in which case God will simply abstain from concurring, and the causal powers of the fire will be insufficient to bring about its effect, as in the example of the Babylonian fire that does not burn in DM 22 sect. 1. See Freddoso’s discussion on concurrency and miracles.

<sup>156</sup> For more details, Van Ruler’s “Franco Petri Burgersdijk and the case of Calvinism within the Neo Scholastic tradition,” in Bos and Krop (eds), *Franco Burgersdijk: neoaristotelianism in Leiden*, and Van Ruler’s *The Crisis of Causality*.

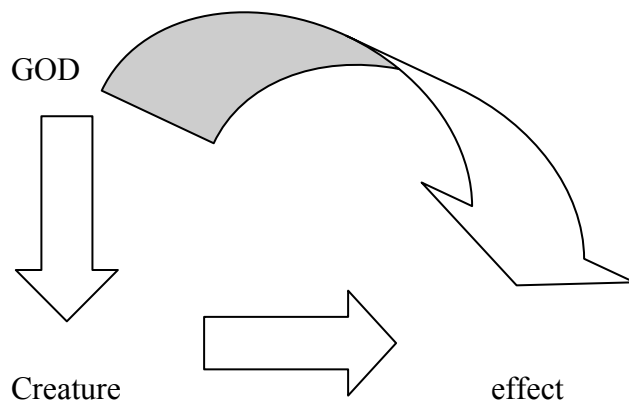
<sup>157</sup> The essence of material substances, as Suárez explains in DM 31, include substantial form and matter. However, for the purposes of efficient causation, only the essence qua substantial form is relevant. See DM 17.

*of the secondary cause has participated being, and for that reason it is necessary that it emanates per se and immediately from what is the first being by essence*<sup>158</sup>

This adds something to the cooperationist picture offered by Suárez: the activity of the created essence is possible only because it ‘participates’ of the activity of God. While God does not ‘switch the power on’, as in the Calvinist interpretation, we still have an action of God that is more than just ‘parallel’, as in the (cooperationist) picture below:



Suárez’s cooperationist picture looks more like this:



This is more similar to the Calvinist picture than Suárez (or Burgersdijk) may have liked. God does not ‘switch the power on’, but does pretty much everything else. God acts vertically, and, so to speak, diagonally (his concurrent causal action is represented by the curved arrow): he

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<sup>158</sup> DM 22, 2; I, 814a.

creates and conserves the creature and its accidents in the only possible way, i.e. by ‘inflowing’ continuously his own being and power in it. Moreover, once the creature acts, God ‘completes’ the action of the creature (action that was started with a power that, in an important sense, is God’s own) by making the creature’s powers actually effective. If, counterfactually, God did not add his concurrent action, the causal power of created things would not be sufficient, as in the Biblical example mentioned in DM 22, 1:

For God deprived the Babylonian fire of its action even though no impediment was set against it from without; therefore, he accomplished it *by taking away his concurrence...* And this is what is meant in Wisdom 11, when it is said that the fire was forgetful of its own powers –since of course *it was not able to exercise its own power without God.*<sup>159</sup>

At the purely horizontal level the powers bring about in the patient those dispositions that will make it possible for the potential substantial form to become actualized. For Suárez, in an interesting passage, this is the equivalent of “giving being”:

... secondary causes, by their efficiency, *extract forms, or essences, which they produce, from potency to act; thus giving them their actual being, or the being of the actual essence; therefore, they give them existence.*<sup>160</sup>

Because “being” and “actual essence” are not separable, the process through which a secondary cause actualizes a potential substantial form is a process of giving being. In a sense,

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<sup>159</sup> Trad. Freddoso, in “God’s General Concurrence With Secondary Causes: Why Conservation Is Not Enough,” p. 573-4.

<sup>160</sup> DM 31, 9; II, 264 a.

the cause does not ‘give’<sup>161</sup> anything to the effect, since it does not give it its own form, or its own being; however, because a thing’s own form determines its causal activity, it can be appropriately said that the actual essence of the effect follows from the actual essence of the cause.

### 3.3 SUÁREZ: CONCLUSION

The “keeping the distance” problem is very evident in Suárez, who makes extensive use of the Scholastic conceptual machinery to explain how is it that things can only have being and activity in a way that is utterly dependent on God, and yet genuinely be substances and causal agents. Did Suárez succeed into ascribing a genuine form of causation to finite substances? It is beyond the scope of this discussion to answer the question, but even an affirmative answer could not ignore that several problems exist.

The gist of Suárez’s discussion is the fundamental role of the relation of an essence and its effects, and the relation of an essence to what brought it into being. Even when God’s concurrence is indispensable for each and every puny creature to carry out each and every puny operation, it is the essence of the creature that determines God’s concurrent action. While Suárez would have cringed at the use of the term ‘determine’, he did conclude that God has a “duty of connaturation,” a duty (not absolute) to adapt himself to the nature of his creature (except in the case of miraculous intervention).

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<sup>161</sup> I am using ‘give’ in the literal, material sense of ‘transferring something from one’s possession to someone else’s possession’: as in “I gave Maddy a bone.”

It is interesting to recall at this point the above discussion on creation; especially where Suárez approvingly quotes Augustine's position that everything that is created was, in a sense, a part of God's essence. Can we say that the essences of the creatures *follow* from the essence of God? Can we say that they *express* it? Suárez did make it clear that, because of the simplicity of the divine essence, everything that belongs to it (including what is eminently contained in it) does not follow, or "emanate," from it in a deterministic way. Suárez follows centuries of Christian voluntarism in claiming that what is created is the outcome of God's free will and choice. Free will disclaimers notwithstanding, one can still say that, in an important sense, the essences of actually created things follow from God's essence, and express it: this is because, in Suárez's own discussion, God's essence (and what is eminently contained in it) determines what he can will and create, and because (as in DM 30, sect. 17) God's knowledge and will are nothing but his omnipotence.<sup>162</sup> From these passages it sounds like God's essence, and nothing else, determines what follows from it. While Suárez obviously wanted to maintain the role of God's absolutely free will, passages like the one quoted above from DM 30, 17 sound as if such freedom of the will were closer to Spinoza's self-determination than to the voluntarism that we are going to see (for example) in Descartes. While Suárez would not have accepted Spinoza's determinism, for obvious doctrinal reason, it seems to me that in his discussion of the relationship between God's omnipotence and will a conflict is more evident than ever: the conflict between maintaining God's infinite distance and independence, from what is created, and maintaining the world's utter dependence from the world. God could have not created the

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<sup>162</sup> 'And so God's knowledge and will are the cause of things, bringing them about per se, insofar as they are really the same being and omnipotence of God...' II, 222b-223a). However, in other passages, Suárez maintains a distinction 'of reason' between the two.

world; and yet, God's creation was a consequence of his essence. God could at any time deprive the world of its existence; and yet, he is bound by his own predeterminations (by a *debitum*, or duty, as Suárez wrote) to concur every time, say, a squirrel snacks on a walnut.

I like to point out that, in Suárez's vast treatise, there are several elements that could have been easily elaborated to a very different view, if one were not bound by the Christian doctrines of creation, free will and transcendence. The view that the essence of God is (eminently) all created things, and that what God eminently contains determines what God knows and wills, could be revised in a strict form of determinism: in fact, disclaimers about God's will being not necessitated, but absolutely free cannot sound very convincing in that context, unless one already shares Suárez's Christian convictions.<sup>163</sup> The view that anything that does not have being in itself can only exist and act with God's continuous assistance is hardly consistent with the view that there are created *substances* that are authentic principal (as opposed to instrumental or occasional) causes. Overall, after reading Suárez's discussion of horizontal causation, one can only conclude that created things can be said to be substances and causes only relatively to each other, not absolutely. Yet, this is not what Suárez wanted. He explicitly rejected this view in DM 22, in the context of his discussion on concurrence.

The motivation, in my view, is the fact that Christian doctrines of personal immortality and responsibility demand that things exist and act on their own in an authentic sense. Only a real (principal) causal agent can be a moral agent. If I sin because, as Jessica Rabbit may put it,

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<sup>163</sup> In fact, a passage in Spinoza's *Short Treatise* is a rebuttal to this kind of position, to this attempt at making continuous creation and concurrence consistent with free will and causation. Spinoza's objection was most likely directed at Descartes, not at Suárez, whom he may have known only indirectly.

God drew me that way, how can I be held responsible? And yet, because it was necessary to preserve God's unique status as being in itself, Suárez could not admit of creatures that could continue existing without God's conservation, or act out of their power independently of God's causal concurrence.

The major problems I have briefly discussed in Suárez's philosophy do not have to be ascribed exclusively to a conflict between Christian dogmas and reason. However, I hope I made the case that they could be seen this way: that, as in the case of Descartes, a philosophically oriented reader could feel a strong feeling of dissatisfaction for the fetters that dogmas having nothing to do with sound reasoning imposed on philosophical systems.

### **3.4 THE JEWISH-SCHOLASTIC SYNTHESIS: ABRAHAM COHEN HERRERA'S *GATE OF HEAVEN***

The problem of making sense of the relationship between God and the world in a way consistent with accepted philosophical principle and Christian dogma, which I dubbed the "keeping the distance" problem, was present in both the Scholastic tradition and in its new competitor, Cartesian philosophy, as we have just seen. By Spinoza's time, a recently published work entitled *Gate of Heaven*, by Abraham Cohen Herrera, offered a remarkable attempt to unify very different interpretations of the nature and works of God; in particular, Herrera drew abundantly from sources as diverse as the Jewish Kabbalah, Aristotle, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Francisco Suárez and other earlier Scholastics, Renaissance authors such as Marsilio Ficino, and, of course,

Jewish philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides.<sup>164</sup> *Gate of Heaven* was written between 1620 and 1635 in Amsterdam, in Spanish. The work circulated extensively in Jewish circles in the Netherlands thanks to the Hebrew translation by Rabbi Aboab da Fonseca, who also happened to be one of Spinoza's teachers (and one of the signatories on Spinoza's excommunication decree), published shortly after Herrera's death in 1635. Herrera, who probably moved to Amsterdam around or shortly after 1620, was also a friend and neighbor of one of the most influential men in Amsterdam's Jewish community, Menasseh ben Israel.<sup>165</sup> According to statements made by Herrera himself in both *Gate of Heaven* and his other kabbalistic work (*House of the Deity*, presumably written shortly before *Gate of Heaven*, which is probably its continuation<sup>166</sup>), his intention is to expose the worthy mysteries of the kabbalistic

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<sup>164</sup> All references to Herrera's *Gate of Heaven* are from *Gate of Heaven*, Krabbenhoft (translator and editor). See also Krabbenhoft's Introduction for a biography of Herrera and information on his sources.

<sup>165</sup> On Ben Israel's influence on the Amsterdam Jewish community, see Nadler's *Spinoza A Life*. Nadler and most recent scholarship (e.g. Klever) conclude that it is unlikely that Ben Israel was ever a teacher of Spinoza.

<sup>166</sup> *House of the Deity*, to the best of my knowledge, is only available in a Hebrew and German translation of 1974.



texts in a rational and scientific way for his people that so far have not mastered philosophical discourse very well.<sup>167</sup>

Even though few scholars mention Herrera today<sup>168</sup> plausible argument can certainly be made for Spinoza's acquaintance with Herrera's work. In her 2004 work, *Alle origini del panteismo*, Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa offers what is probably the first in depth analysis of Herrera's contribution to the development of Spinoza's philosophy, including some interesting textual analysis. Her work is extremely detailed, especially in her philological apparatus. Yet I disagree with her philosophical interpretation, even though I share her general conclusion that Herrera did influence Spinoza. According to Saccaro Del Buffa, Herrera's contribution lies mainly in a concept of God that Spinoza adopted in his earliest writing (which, for Saccaro Del Buffa, is *Short Treatise*, not *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*<sup>169</sup>) and rejected in a more mature phase of his work, starting around 1662. Briefly, this view sees God as the totality

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<sup>167</sup> See Richard Popkin's "Christian Jews and Jewish Christians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century," in *Christian Jews and Jewish Christians: from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, Popkin and Weiner (eds.).

<sup>168</sup> Past authors who mentioned Herrera's influence are Wolfson (*The Philosophy of Spinoza*) and Gueroult (*Spinoza: Dieu*). However, they do not specifically address the genesis of Spinoza's concept of causation.

<sup>169</sup> *Short Treatise* and *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* will be discussed in a later chapter. It is not my intention to discuss in detail the problems with Spinoza's chronology; I will just state that, in my view, Saccaro Del Buffa does not offer convincing evidence to reject Mignini's chronology.

of substance-attributes, each of which consists of a single attribute which is infinite in its own kind.<sup>170</sup> This, according to Saccaro Del Buffa, interestingly resembles the relationship between Ein Sof (the First Cause, beyond all being and substance) and the *sefirot*. For Saccaro Del Buffa, Spinoza firstly conceived God as that totality-beyond-everything that comprehends (but does not transcend, contrary to Herrera and the Neoplatonic and kabbalistic traditions he refers to) the single-attribute substances. In this form, Spinoza's metaphysics would constitute a form of panentheism, rather than pantheism: everything is comprehended by a God that is beyond nature, rather than being identical with God as expressed in the formula *Deus sive Natura*.

I agree with Saccaro del Buffa that Herrera is important for an understanding of the development of Spinoza's thought, but I believe that his influence concerns the elaboration of the concept of causation as expression, rather than a concept of the deity that Spinoza never held to begin with. While the term *expression* is not found in Herrera directly, he makes a strong use of the Neoplatonic idea that the various descending orders of being, which he identifies with the *sefirot*,<sup>171</sup> are true manifestations, or explications, of the essence of Ein Sof, the First Cause (or

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<sup>170</sup> This interpretation of the God of *Short Treatise* (as opposed to the interpretation that sees it as God-as-substance, the same as in *Ethics*) was also offered by Gueroult in his *Spinoza*, which Saccaro Del Buffa refers to. It is an interesting interpretation, but, for reasons that I will explain later, I do not think that there is sufficient evidence for it. At the most, one can argue that the text is ambiguous at points.

<sup>171</sup> Sefirah is Hebrew for number. Originally, in the *Book of Creation*, the ten sefirot were the ten ideal numbers. The numbers were not just arithmetic symbols, but represented cosmological factors involved in the creation, such as the spirit of God, the elements, etc. The

God<sup>172</sup>), which is in itself unknowable and inaccessible. This in itself should be enough to show that, while Herrera was a plausible source for ideas that might lead to Spinoza's concept of expression in its relation to causation, Spinoza offered a completely original elaboration in a metaphysical context that rejected many of Herrera's basic tenets. Herrera, as I will soon show, suffered as well from the "keeping the distance" problem, though in his unorthodox revision of traditional concepts he tried to deal with it as well as he could.

### 3.5 HERRERA: VERTICAL CAUSATION AND THE *SEFIROT*

The opening of *Gate of Heaven* posits an

eternal and uncaused causal Agent of everything, which, because it exists  
by itself, in itself, and for itself, and not in or for another being, is necessary

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letters of the Jewish alphabet were considered cosmological factors as well. The basic idea is that speech, in all its alphanumeric components, does not simply represent being, but also produces and manipulates it (this is valid only for the Hebrew language, though). This is not the right place for an in depth discussion of the history of kabbalistic thought. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah*.

<sup>172</sup> Literally, Ein Sof means "endless," "unbounded." In the Kabbalah language it is the name given to the Deity.

being: by its essence it is the purest actuality, free of all material or passive potency.<sup>173</sup>

This being is superior to all other beings, and “contains them all in itself with surpassing superiority and simplicity, and produces, sustains, rules and perfects all things out of itself.” Notice that this is an explicit endorsement of the containment principle. So far it is clear why Herrera thought that Scholastic philosophy could be used to philosophically elucidate and strengthen kabbalistic theology. This account is very close to the Scholastic concept of God; both Thomas Aquinas and Suárez would have endorsed this passage word for word, including the statement that God contains everything that he created “with surpassing superiority and simplicity.” The passages where Herrera explains why God created also echo the Scholastic tradition: God created

not in order to acquire or add to itself something that it lacks (because, being infinitely perfect, it does not and cannot lack anything), but in order, by its mercy and grace, to give and communicate to all things some part of the goodness that it is and contains within itself with enormous abundance, activating in all of its effects and in each other individually, albeit in some more and in others less,

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<sup>173</sup> *Gate of Heaven*, I, I: page 3. Notice the reference to the fact that Ein Sof is free of matter. Herrera must then explain how God could have created matter without violating the containment principle.

that perfection which, although in itself it cannot be attained or grasped by created minds, is only knowable through those effects and in them...<sup>174</sup>

Herrera here answers the question of why a perfect God who does not need anything may want to create. His response brings together Judeo-Christian and emanationist themes: creation is a consequence of God's overflowing with being and perfection, and the individual things are manifestations of God's nature, but (as we will see) emanation is not a necessary act: it is voluntary and motivated by God's "mercy and grace."

While I will point to analogies between Herrera and Spinoza, it is important to remind ourselves upfront that the sense in which created things 'express God's essence' for Herrera is very different from the sense in which they do so for Spinoza. While I will devote one of the next sections to the concept of expression in Herrera, I can anticipate that for him "there is nothing that can be understood from its effects except that it contains all of them with surpassing simplicity and superiority."<sup>175</sup> In other words, there is an important difference between attributes that "express" God's essence the way it is in reality (as in Spinoza), and the manifestations of a deity whose essence per se is utterly incomprehensible.

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<sup>174</sup> *Gate of Heaven*, I, I; page 4. Compare with Suárez's discussion on our knowledge of God and eminent containment.

<sup>175</sup> *Gate of Heaven*, I, I; page 4.

### 3.6 HERRERA: EMANATION AND EXPRESSION

In one of the opening sections of Book 1, Herrera introduces the containment principle, justified with the statement that “no being can or does give to any other that which it does not formally and effectively<sup>176</sup> have in itself.” So, “Ein Sof is the perfection that ...surpasses, *contains*, *causes*, and *is able to cause* all other perfections that do or can exist outside it.”<sup>177</sup> Ein Sof is described as utterly beyond comprehension or description; this does not prevent Herrera, however, from describing it as generous and good, and from concluding that it is because of such generosity and goodness, or “mercy and grace,” that it decides to give itself to all things, bringing them into being.

Because of the infinite gap between the First Cause and its effects (created things), the former is incomprehensible: in fact, Herrera explains

For knowledge to be possible, there must be some *comparison or congruity* between the cognitive power and its knowable object. But between the First Cause... and all produced and producible minds... there is not and there cannot be any correspondence or comparison by which they may grasp or understand it.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> “Effectively” here means “virtually.”

<sup>177</sup> *Gate of Heaven*, I, I; page 5.

<sup>178</sup> *Gate of Heaven*, page 10.

In Book 3, ch. 6, the First Cause is described as “unlimited power by its very essence, not restricted to any one rank of power and excellence, but rather absolute and limitless.”<sup>179</sup> Other interesting passages depict Ein Sof as being boundless activity and power; power and activity by way of which Ein Sof persists forever in existence. Herrera explicitly insists on the First Cause being uncaused: he fully endorses the traditional idea (that we have already seen in Suárez) of an entity whose essence is pure being which, because it is being itself, perdures in existence infinitely and independently of any cause. We have previously seen in Suárez’s discussion the equation of God’s essence with his power. So far, Herrera’s picture is fully compatible with the Scholastics, except for the terminology. It is time now to focus on the differences between the Scholastic and Herrera’s picture, a difference that is mainly due to Herrera’s kabbalism: in his framework, the First Cause expresses its nature and power in determined, ‘lawful’ ways (or ‘classes’), as realized by the descending order of the *sefirot*.

Any attempt at describing the First Cause would fail, because no perfection known to our mind is absolutely infinite, and therefore, in order to conceive it, we would impose negation and limitation on that which has none.<sup>180</sup> However,

So that there could be both the one and the other, the hidden and the unnameable primordial Truth determined to manifest itself... through a number of bounded intermediaries which by limiting it and variously extending it adjusted it

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<sup>179</sup> Page 96. At this level, the power is not expressed yet.

<sup>180</sup> Compare with Suárez’s discussion on our understanding of the essence of God: we conceive attributes as distinct from each other, but in God they are all one. On Suárez’s ambiguity because of his concept of “distinction of reason,” see previous discussion.

to the capacity of produced minds...like a pure and transparent fluid that looks different in different glasses.<sup>181</sup>

These intermediaries are not creatures. Herrera will introduce them in the following chapter, and will elaborate on the theme further on, though not always in a consistent manner (as we will see). Here is how Krabbenhof explains the relationship between Ein Sof and the *sefirot*:

This absolute being causes everything that exists because it is one of its characteristics to be manifested. Its manifestation is accomplished by a two-stage process. In the first stage, it gives rise to an entity that is in all respects identical to it, except that it is not infinite but finite, without it implying any diminishment of its being or power, and without imputing any duality to the absolute unity of its cause. This process is called *emanation*, and by it a single being emerges from the first cause. Like its cause, it is perfect and powerful, but because, unlike its cause, it is also limited, it has the ability to bring about the existence of all other things, that is, the world of plurality<sup>182</sup>...

However, the relationship between Ein Sof and the *sefirot* is not as simple as Krabbenhof reads it. In this passage, Herrera seems to take the position that *all* the sefirot, not just one, emanate directly from Ein Sof:

The *sefirot* or divine numbers that emanate *directly* from it [the First Cause] and by its powers and ongoing assistance produce and continuously rule all things that can be described... They are *propagations* of the pure divine

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<sup>181</sup> Pages 11-12.

<sup>182</sup> Krabbenhof, Introduction to *Gate of Heaven*, xxiv.



oneness, *communications* of its divine goodness, *representations* of its highest truth, and *participations* of its being (which exists in virtue of its own essence), images and likenesses of its mind, *demonstrations* of its will, vessels or *receptacles* of its potency, *instruments* of its activity, and *rays* by which it illumines and scrutinizes all things... To conclude, the *sefirot* are the formal perfections that, because they depend on the singular, superior, causal and boundless one, are the cause of all the participated and restricted perfections that are resplendent in those minds that are separated from matter, in the intellectual spirits, and in both celestial and elemental or elementary bodies.<sup>183</sup>

Here, the *sefirot* are the intermediary causes: they are what creatures participate in (insofar as creatures have perfections), but they in turn are and act because of the continuous emanation from Ein Sof. More evidence for this is in the passage where Herrera explains the relationship between the One and the *numbers*:

Because the One exists prior to all numbers, it is pure and simple in itself, singular and without accompaniment outside itself. It contains all numbers in itself in such a way that none of them exists or can exist without it, although it [the One] exists and is constituted without them. It causes all of them, giving them the being, sustenance and perfection of which they are capable... Likewise, only more so, Ein Sof the uncaused First Cause precedes and exists prior to all other things...<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Page 12-13.

<sup>184</sup> Page 6.

In Proposition XV, Herrera insisted that the *sefirot* are not creatures, but emanations *that contain everything that Ein Sof is manifested in*, together with its causal power and ruling intellect. While distinct emanations, the *sefirot*, insofar as they were contained in the First Cause, were “without any distinction or plurality,” and even once created, Herrera claims,

Emanated from the First Cause, *and from each another*, the lowest from the highest, in such a way that they remain forever inseparably united with it and among themselves to such an extent that, in projecting them out of itself, their source Ein Sof not only surrounds and contains them from outside, but also penetrates and fills them from inside...<sup>185</sup>

In this context, the *sefirot* are emanated from each other.

In Book 3 of *Gate of Heaven*, Herrera expands on his discussion of the First Cause, and in Book 4 he introduces a discussion of the first sefirah, also named Adam Qadmon, or Keter Elyon:

One can be convinced by these arguments that only a single most perfect effect issues immediately and directly from the First Cause, that our mequbal and teachers... call Adam Qadmon<sup>186</sup>... and the other kabbalists call Keter Elyon... The first is that only oneness can issue from oneness, and only the same can issue from that which always is and remains the same, because if each one acted

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<sup>185</sup> Page 22.

<sup>186</sup> Also Primordial Man. The discussion of Adam Kadmon makes it clear that this ‘Primordial Man’ is not really a human being.

according to what it is by the activity of the most simple One, through an operation that is in no way distinguishable from it...<sup>187</sup>

This passage, stating that only one effect could immediately come from the First Cause, conflicts with the previous passages, stating that all the *sefirot* are immediate productions of God. So does the following, which responds to some Scholastic interpretations of creation:

No more than one effect, therefore, issues directly from the most simple One, which is confirmed by the fact that all those who would prefer for many effects to have issued directly from the First Cause agree that they do not emanate from its singular and most simple nature, which as such would produce only a single effect (because from pure oneness nothing but oneness can issue), but rather from the plurality of ideas, and representational species and models that it [the First Cause] conceives and manifests in its divine mind, and from the varied preferences, intentions and commands of its free will and consent, which are undoubtedly to locate plurality in the most simple oneness, and specific and diverse activities, attributes, relations, and operations in the singular, absolute infinity that surpasses everything.<sup>188</sup>

It is not possible to make sense of the First Cause, conceived as oneness and simplicity, creating immediately a plurality of substances. The argument based on the presence of ideas in the divine mind fails: for Herrera, it is the equivalent of ascribing a form of plurality to God. The target may well be Aquinas, who in *De Potentia* (and other works, such as his commentary on

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<sup>187</sup> Page 106.

<sup>188</sup> Page 106-7.

Aristotle's *On the heavens*, and *Summa Theologiae*) argued that the causality of God must not be understood according to the emanationist model, but rather according to the artist model. God does not create because necessitated by his nature, but, like the artist, out of free choice. So, as Te Velde explains it

The form of the effect *must somehow preexist in the agent*, for it is according to its form that the agent produces a determinate effect. But how is it possible that many and diverse effects each according to its own form pre-exist in the simple divine cause? Thomas answers that the many forms of creatures pre-exist in God in a twofold way, namely in his nature as well as in his art. In the divine nature all forms exist as in the *operative power*, not according to their specific character by which they are diverse and distinct from one another, for no effect is equal to that power; the forms which are multiplied in the effects are one and simple in the power of the cause. In God's intellect (or art), by contrast, *all forms pre-exist as the many objects of knowledge...* since it is by the intellect that the specific and distinct form of each thing is conceived...<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, page 104. Also, see Te Velde's discussion on Thomas' commentary on *De Divinis Nominibus* (by the pseudo-Dionysius): "Creatures do not result from a differentiation of the divine essence in many parts, but they are the many partial 'similitudes' into which the similitude of God's essence is distinguished and multiplied. It is through this *similitudo* that the divine cause is 'propagated and multiplied' in his creatures (*propagatur* and *multiplicatur*)" (page 93.) It is in God's intellect that the *similitudo* (God wants things to be like him qua being and good) is expressed in many

Whichever the actual target of Herrera, it is obvious that for him positing the ideas of the existing things' forms in God's intellect is a violation of God's unity. This shows that Herrera's kabbalism is much closer to Plotinian emanationism than to any Scholastic author. However, while Herrera's kabbalist interpretation owes much to emanationism, as I anticipated, he accepted the criticism of emanationism elaborated firstly by Maimonides in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, against the Neoplatonic *Book of Causes* (which Maimonides ascribed to Aristotle), a criticism reprised by Thomas Aquinas in the context we have just seen. So, Herrera posits himself in between hard-line emanationism and Scholastic creationism: he accepts from the former the idea that the One could only create a single effect that is similar to him (insofar as it is possible for something created to be similar to the First Cause), and from the latter the idea that emanation is not a necessary process, a consequence of the essence of God.

In Book 4, Herrera introduces a series of possible objections to strong emanationism and necessitarianism. The most relevant to this discussion is found in Book IV, Ch. 3, but the objection is not answered until Book V, Ch. 6. The problem is: either the production of the *sefirot* (and therefore the creation of everything that exists) is natural and necessary for Ein Sof, or it is a free act. If the former, it would follow that Ein Sof is not free; if the latter, how to explain the complex machinery of the *sefirot*, when Ein Sof, being omnipotent, could have brought up every individual being directly, with no need for the intermediaries?<sup>190</sup>

Herrera's answer, following Maimonides and other philosophers that he quoted, is that Ein Sof "does not act out of the necessity of its nature, but rather by the admirable counsel of its

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different ways, depending on the level of perfection of the various creabilia (*Summa Theologiae*, I q.3.)

<sup>190</sup> Page 119.

wise understanding.”<sup>191</sup> Herrera quoted Maimonides’ argument that, if creation had happened according to the necessity of God’s nature, there would be many unexplained mysteries, such as “why some of the celestial bodies move at greater speed than others, some from east to west and others in the opposite direction, when they are neither larger nor smaller...”<sup>192</sup> According to Maimonides, and Herrera, such inconsistencies can be explained only as the free (if possibly arbitrary) choice of an omnipotent creator, rather than as the product of necessity. More arguments come from Averroes and Duns Scotus:

The second argument, which Averroes attributes to al-Ghazzali: if the First Cause, which acts through the necessity of its understanding, were to act without the consent of its free will, *because it understands the opposites, as it most certainly understands them, it would surely activate them together*, setting the Prime Mover simultaneously in motion from east to west and from west to east... Duns Scotus... adds what we cite as the third argument, that if the First Cause acted by virtue of its nature and out of necessity, it would proceed infinitely and there would be no order, symmetry or infinite number. As Pereira<sup>193</sup> says in his *Philosophy of Nature*, to be an agent of necessity while possessing infinite active potency seems to imply a contradiction, since, possessing it, *it would produce everything that it could, including an infinite effect, which is*

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<sup>191</sup> Page 158.

<sup>192</sup> Page 159.

<sup>193</sup> According to Krabbenhoft, the reference is to Benito Pereira’s *Physicorum sive de principi naturalium libri XV* (1562).

*impossible*, or at least... it would produce nothing or it would make an undefined, indeterminate effect which would be no more one thing than another, no more this thing than that, or, having produced it, there would be an infinite effect, which is impossible.<sup>194</sup>

The order and variety of finite things that we experience can only be explained by a God that created with free will and design. Another argument (Herrera lists many, and I will not discuss them all), ascribed to Duns Scotus, is that if the First Cause is necessarily connected to its effects because these follow necessarily from its nature, then paradoxically the First Cause would become dependent on its effects: applying *modus tollens*, if the effects did not exist, then neither would the First Cause; a conclusion that both Duns Scotus and Herrera find unacceptable. This short passage is of particular interest because, as we will see in the next two chapters, Spinoza offers a rejection of exactly this argument in an early endorsement of the principle of plenitude in *Short Treatise*, and later in *Ethics* I.

So, the First Cause produces not out of the necessity of its own nature, but out of free will and choice (Herrera mentions the choice, on the part of the unknowable, to make itself manifest). It is relevant to mention that, for Herrera, the First Cause's expressions and explications are as well self-limitations: what was unbounded and beyond categorization, pure being-beyond-being, becomes "being as such." Because the emanation of the sefirot, and of the rest of the creation, is voluntary, it is as if God limited himself in order to create the world as it is. This concept (the Jewish *simsum*, or "shrinking"), which was inspired by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, sounds odd given the recurring language of overflowing, abundance, and generosity. It seems that, in its overflowing, the First Cause somehow underachieves, because from what was infinite

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<sup>194</sup> Pages 160-1.

and boundless only finite effects follow. Could not the First Cause bring about more perfect effects? Or rather, why bring about anything at all, given that Ein Sof was perfect and in no need of creating?<sup>195</sup>

For Herrera, however, this is simply more evidence that the First Cause acts not necessarily, but out of free choice. This also explains the ‘mechanics’ of creation. Because of shrinking, or *simsum*, the First Cause could have immediately brought about the infinite low-level created things, without the mediation of the *sefirot*; yet, echoing a Scholastic argument we have already heard in Suárez, Herrera reminds us that it is more appropriate for a generous and powerful deity to bring about causally active beings as secondary causes, rather than effecting everything by itself. I will discuss the causation of created things in the next section.

So, the First Cause chose to make itself manifest. Here are two passages describing the nature of the first *sefirah*, Adam Qadmon:

The first cause *produced all other effects in the first one*, because... it is One over all, like that which, because it is *not contained by, or included in any class of things is above and beyond all classes*; not being specific or limited to a specific class of effects, it is extended to all things which are possible in an absolute sense... But *because only one effect issues directly from the most pure One*... there must emanate from it a unity that is entirely unified, insofar as it issues from this most unique source and is similar to it, *but that becomes a manifold, albeit complete and perfect*... because it has to be a manifold, being an effect of the One and subsequent and inferior to it, it is better for it to be a *complete, universal manifold rather than a specific one, limited to this or that*

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<sup>195</sup> See *Gate of Heaven*, book 2, II.



*class*, in particular because that which is first in a class is perfect in that class and as such contains in itself all members of that class and consequently all their natural perfections. Therefore *the most perfect first effect must contain and does contain all other effects in its unique being* without division by location and place and without any diversity of movement or time.<sup>196</sup>

As I pointed out in the beginning of this section, Herrera also claims (apparently unaware of the *prima facie* contradiction) that the first manifestation of the First Cause is a manifold of perfections.<sup>197</sup> In the first passage, Adam Qadmon is described as the first *sefirah*, which contains and causes all the others. In the second passage, the various *sefirot* are described each as a direct emanation and expression of the “primary infinity,” each perfect in its class and order. A solution to this puzzle can be found if one remembers that, for Herrera, the *sefirot* are both distinct *and* united: in each of them all the other are contained. Because the language of arithmetic is used as a symbol of ontology, Herrera could probably solve the contradiction (though he did not offer this argument explicitly) by saying that all the numbers following from One are different and at the same time contained in each other (each number contains and is contained in the numbers that compose it: 5 contains 3 and 2, and is contained by them because they make it up).

However, I do not intend to discuss possible solutions to the problems of Herrera’s kabbalistic-Neoplatonic numerology. What matters is that Herrera is here reprising a historically important

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<sup>196</sup> Page 194.

<sup>197</sup> See page 240, quoted earlier in this section.

idea:<sup>198</sup> that what is absolutely infinite can only be understood through its manifesting itself (remember that for Herrera the First Cause emanates out of its free will) in expressions, each of which is *not* a separate entity, but simply a way, or a channel, in which the First Cause will and power is ordered and realized in the multiplicity of creations. While important distinctions must, and will, be made between Herrera and Spinoza, I suggest that Herrera's text suggested Spinoza the idea of a God expressing its nature<sup>199</sup> through emanations that are actually (as Herrera himself put it in ambiguous passages) both its effects and its operations, and in a sense not distinct from it at all: the *sefirot* are "*efficacies* of the First Cause, issued from it *without division*, filled with it without loss or decrease..."<sup>200</sup> What makes Herrera's model interesting is that, in putting together the Kabbalah's *sefirot* with the emanationist model, he elaborated the idea that

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<sup>198</sup> We have seen that the idea was present in the Patristic tradition (Augustine) as well as in the Scholastic. We also find it as a constant in the Neoplatonic tradition and its Renaissance followers, as well as, of course, in Jewish mysticism.

<sup>199</sup> Spinoza obviously rejected Herrera's voluntarist interpretation: later we will see how he bit the bullet, accepting the consequences of determinism that Herrera found unacceptable (such as that God must create everything that is in his power).

<sup>200</sup> Page 255. Wolfson (*The Philosophy of Spinoza*) devotes little space to Herrera, but he finds evidence of Herrera's influence on Spinoza in the latter's use of the expression *facies totius universi* as a definition of the mediate infinite mode in his letter to Schuller (E. 64). For Wolfson, this evokes the kabbalistic term *parzufim*, which Herrera uses in Spanish (*parzupim*) in *Gate of Heaven* (Book 4, Ch. 3) referring to the mediate (post-Adam Qadmon) emanations: he calls them "faces of the universe of the infinite."

God did not simply zap (or emanate...) a world into existence, but needed (or better, chose) to express his power in different basic ways in order to bring an ordered world into existence.<sup>201</sup> The emanationist element, of course, is the basis of the idea of the ordered intermediaries (from the One to the manifold and the material); however, Herrera's intermediaries, the *sefirot*,<sup>202</sup> are more like states, or *operations*, of God than actual intermediary beings, and this is an innovation with respect to Plotinus or the *Liber De Causis*.

### 3.7 HERRERA: HORIZONTAL CAUSATION

Herrera did not spend a lot of time discussing the created universe. However, a section of Book II is devoted to secondary causes. It is worthwhile to quote extensively:

It is true that among these subordinate causes *the lower is always like an instrument of the higher*, by whose powers it exists and can and does operate, and all are instruments of the primary One that is the most simple and infinite light which, not depending on another cause, is the cause of all causes, and of all effects; it is always, in everything, entirely what they are, have, can and do operate, *and is therefore more the cause of the effects of the other causes than they are*, intentionally activating through them that which they themselves

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<sup>201</sup> Thomas' concept of "similitudes" was farther from emanationism. Thomas never considers such intermediaries. The *similitudo* was in God's mind.

<sup>202</sup> This is valid regardless of whether there is a first sefirah that then causes the others, or all the sefirot follow immediately from the One.

activate *but ever more perfectly than if it were to act directly on its own.*<sup>203</sup>

Everything that we have said Adam Qadmon activates... all of this therefore Ein Sof, the First Causal Agent, activates, making use of these instruments in order to be more perfectly communicated and more clearly revealed to its effects, like a very powerful monarch who is more glorious and superior in ruling over kings and princes who rule and govern others in their own right, than in ruling over slaves and commoners, who derive nothing from others, because the perfection of the cause is revealed even more perfectly through even more perfect effects than through those that are lesser, or less perfect. And there is no doubt that the greater goodness is the one that, when communicated, not only resembles its effects in its being, *but also in its causing*, giving them the being by which they are constituted in themselves and the communication by which, going out from themselves, they cause others to exist and operate, *representing their source in both their being and their operation, causing effects that cause other effects.*<sup>204</sup>

In this lengthy passage, Herrera endorses two positions that are *prima facie* at odds with each other. Firstly, he stated that the One is more the cause of effects than their secondary causes themselves, more the cause of heating metal than the fire itself. Then, he specified that, by creating substances with causal powers, the One makes himself manifest in a more perfect way. This echoes Suárez's argument that it is more consistent with God's perfection to create causally

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<sup>203</sup> The reference here is to *Liber de Causis*, P1; Herrera explicitly quotes this work in a reprisal of the argument in Book 6.

<sup>204</sup> Page 77.

active substances, rather than to bring about the effects himself and make it look as if the substances had causal powers.

As for Suárez, for Herrera substances exist and cause only insofar as they participate in the constant influx of being and power from God (the One). Thus, Herrera would have certainly agreed that substances have no causal powers of their own. The question is, are the powers that substances have *real* causal powers? For Herrera, they obviously are, compatibly with their status as created and utterly dependent beings. His analogy with the monarch who rules through powerful princes, rather than by giving orders directly to the lowly peasants, reveals that for Herrera being an instrumental cause is compatible with real causation (contrary to Suárez, who denies that created substances are instrumental causes of God). For Herrera, being an instrumental cause means being a link in the causal chain that goes from the One to the material substances in this world. Being an instrumental cause in this sense *requires* active causal powers. In this sense, the noble courtier who receives an order from the king and, in turn, in executing his order, gives orders to his subjects, is at the same time an instrumental cause *and* a real cause.

This solves the *prima facie* contradiction, in Herrera's text, between the assertion that things are instrumental causes and the assertion of their authentic causal powers. However, the problem remains of what kind of causes created things can be. How is it possible that things have authentic causal powers, and at the same time the One is more the cause of their effects than they themselves are?

Herrera's problem, clearly, is analogous to Suárez's, though his strong statement of the primacy of the One's causation over created things' causation makes his position more difficult than Suárez's. Suárez, in fact, had stated that, even if God is still the first cause of every effect, created things are the *principal* cause, of the cause that must be ascribed with the effect (as in

MD 17 and 22). On the other hand, the deep dependence of things on God for their being and power make the claim of the authenticity of secondary causation ring hollow in both authors.

Ascribing a form of occasionalism or causal harmony to Herrera does not really work, because the language he uses is not compatible with it. Given the scarcity of his discussion, a possible interpretation of Herrera's view on secondary causation could be some sort of causal concurrence, cooperationist picture, à la Suárez. This could be confirmed by the following quote, where Herrera echoes Suárez, even using the same Biblical example:

And thus, by simply not cooperating with the activity of the secondary cause (however powerful, immediate and ready they may be by themselves to act, and the subject disposed and ready to receive), it [the First Cause] can ensure that they do not act, just as, by simply not cooperating in its operation, it ensured that the blazing Chaldean fire did not burn the combustible bodies of the three young men...<sup>205</sup>

The problem with the cooperationist picture, as we have seen, is Herrera's statement that God is more 'intimately' the cause of secondary effects than their own secondary causes.

Like Suárez, Herrera is plagued by transcendence. I do not believe that either author gives a satisfactory account of horizontal causation.

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<sup>205</sup> Page 78. Both the argument and the Biblical example were used in arguments supporting causal concurrence, so the fact that Herrera used it is no evidence that he took it from Suárez. He did quote Suárez, as well as plenty of other Scholastic sources (such as Thomas, Scotus, Durandus, and Ferrarensis).

### 3.8 HERRERA: CONCLUSION

Herrera's style is very different from, say, Suárez's or Descartes'. He uses plenty of metaphors (many from the emanationist tradition, such as the metaphors of light or overflowing water), and he is often more rhetorical than logical. However, we can trace the elements of the 'keeping the distance' problem in his work as well. Herrera insisted that what is *prima facie* a contradiction is no contradiction at all, but it is simply a manifestation of our cognitive limits and of the gap between the infinite nature of the deity and our finite nature.

However, even being charitable, his insistence on transcendence on the one hand, and on the immanence and unity of it all on the other, bring about inconsistencies; so can his different description of the emanations. Like Maimonides, and to some extent authors such as Thomas and Suárez, he introduces the emanationist model in a context that is not fully compatible with it, because of their insistence on voluntarism. In the emanationist model, the various degrees of being overflow from the One due to necessity.<sup>206</sup> Like Spinoza's God, the One is not determined by anything outside of it: it is simply in its nature to 'produce'. Herrera summarized several objections to this idea, calling it inconsistent. Even assuming that it is inconsistent, the voluntaristic solution is not much better, given that it claims to explain reality through the free choice of a being that has been defined as utterly unknowable and unexplainable.

To be sure, emanationism has problems. The most important are the issue of the relation between the One and the world, and the origin of multiplicity and matter. However, introducing free will in the First Cause will not eliminate any of the problems, and will only compound them

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<sup>206</sup> Of course, for both Plotinus and Proclus necessity was not a problem, given that neither was Christian.

with issues such as the origin of evil. In what Herrera has in common with the Jewish and Scholastic scholarship, he shares their problem.

As with the Scholastics, Herrera wanted to construe a world that was utterly dependent on the First Cause; a cause that acts through its instruments, the *sefirot*, but still permeates all of reality, infusing it with being and activity flowing down from it to the lowest rings of the ladder of being, through a series of descending intermediates. As in Suárez (though of course the systems are deeply different), the actual causal role of created things is ambiguous at best. Like Suárez, Herrera abundantly used the concept of eminent causation to explain how everything can be contained in the First Cause without implying that the First Cause is anything but simple infinite perfection. Herrera was presumably sensitive to the possible conflict between eminent containment of the *creabilia* and the simplicity and infinity of God: this would explain his adopting the Neoplatonic emanated intermediaries<sup>207</sup> as the equivalent of the Kabbalah *sefirot*. But, as in the case of Neoplatonic emanationism, the intermediaries only beg the question. In this sense, the passages endorsing the emanation of ten *sefirot* at the same time are more troubling than the passages where Ein Sof emanates a single *sefirot* which contains in itself all the ‘classes’ of being as perfections: the latter accepts that from the One (First Cause), a manifold cannot follow. However, we still have a point at which what is utterly one, simple, perfect and finite ‘degenerates’ into bringing about finite, imperfect pluralities.

More generally, Herrera is unclear on the relationship between created beings and God, and between the horizontal and vertical levels of causation, as we have seen in the previous

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<sup>207</sup> See Krabbenhoft’s commentary on the analogies between Herrera’s *sefirot* and the emanation systems in Plotinus’ *Henneads*, Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, and the *Liber de Causis*.



section. These problems are not new, but Herrera failed to solve them. What exactly does it mean to cause when all that is activity and being comes from God (not just at the moment of creation, but continuously) was still an open question. Problematic as well is the status of these causal agents: are they substances? Herrera does not say.

In discussing the status of the *sefirot* not as created, separated entities, but as actions and manifestations, as ‘extensions’ of the One, however, Herrera did offer an interesting revision of the status of God’s emanated intermediaries. This, I believe, could have inspired Spinoza’s concept of expression in both its relation to causation and in its use in the definition of God’s attributes. If one throws out of Herrera’s picture free will, one comes closer to Spinoza than to the traditional emanationist picture: this is because, as I discussed above, the *sefirot* are more like basic states of God, each of which being a ‘class’, each of which manifesting (in Herrera’s terms) God’s creative powers and activity in that specific class. There is a degree of separation between the essence of the First Cause and each of the *sefirot*; this makes sense when one thinks that in the Scholastic tradition the essence and the powers were considered separated (powers being accidents, as we have seen).

The points where Adam Qadmon is described as the first emanation containing in itself the other *sefirot* are particularly interesting. One can see in Adam Qadmon (with grain of salt, of course) a possible ancestor of Spinoza’s God, in the sense that they both contain the whole of reality and do not transcend it. The most important differences that we have to keep in mind is that Adam Qadmon is *not* ontologically independent: it is an ‘expansion’, a manifestation of the First Cause, and, as such, it is not absolutely infinite. However, putting this aside for the moment, it is interesting to notice that Adam Qadmon contains in itself the manifold, and contains it in *distinct basic ways*, in which it will explicate it by causing the other nine *sefirot*.

Eliminating (or putting aside) transcendence, and freedom of the will, we have a revision of the emanationist picture in which the concept of expressing one's nature and power in basic and distinct ways, all independent and all into one, is introduced.

I hope I have made a plausible case that Spinoza's concept of expression might have been inspired by Herrera. Obviously, Herrera's discussion is mainly concerned with the vertical level, or the relation of the First Cause with everything else. There is no real discussion of natural philosophy, which is understandable, given that Herrera's goal was to discuss the Kabbalah in philosophical terms (and there is nothing concerning the laws of mechanics, or biology, or psychology in the Kabbalah). However, the concept of expression sketched in Herrera can (and will in Spinoza) be generalized.

In Spinoza, this elimination of the ontological or causal separation between an essence and its effects is generalized and applied both to God and to finite things, in an univocal model of causation: as we will see, both God and his modes express their essence in their causal action. But we have seen that, in Herrera's picture, God (or Ein Sof) *expresses* himself in emanations that are basic classes of being (and activity), these emanations being not quite creatures, and thus not quite separated, not different substances (as in the previous emanationist systems). In Spinoza, God expresses himself in attributes that are basic way of being active (power of thinking, power of being extension as motion and rest, power of infinite other unknowable things), these attributes being constitutive of God's essence, in the sense that God's essence is nothing above and beyond power expressed in these basic ways. God's essence as infinite power is the reason, or cause,<sup>208</sup> why God exists to begin with; this is why God is cause of himself in the same sense that he is the cause of all the modes.

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<sup>208</sup> See the discussion in Carraud's *Causa sive ratio*, ch. 3.

### 3.9 CONCLUSION

In the previous part, I discussed several problems with Cartesian metaphysics. With all its problems, it is an unquestionable fact that Spinoza was deeply interested in Descartes' philosophy. A possible story (and a story it will remain, unless new documents are uncovered) is that Spinoza, unsatisfied with the orthodox studies in his Yeshiva, tried alternative forms of Judaism, such as Herrera's Kabbalah or Leone Ebreo's mysticism.<sup>209</sup> Whether he was infatuated with mysticism for a while (it can happen to the best of us), or whether his rationalistic temperament soon prevailed and forced him to move on to more philosophically rigorous works is an open question, given that we have no documents of Spinoza's thought before 1661. Herrera seems to represent an intermediate step, inspiring for Spinoza insofar as he tries to apply the philosophical method to traditional kabbalah. Of course the method that Herrera chooses is far from what Spinoza (after Descartes) will consider the ideal, *ordine geometrico*, method. While Herrera adopts the language of numbers descending from the One, the highly metaphoric way in which he refers to properties of numbers (such as 'participating' in each other, or creating each other) is not exactly an example of geometrical rigor.

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<sup>209</sup> A copy of the Spanish translation of Leone Ebreo's (Jehuda ben Isaac Abrabanel)

*Dialoghi D'Amore* was found in Spinoza's library at his death.

Wim Klever, in 1991,<sup>210</sup> credits Franciscus Van den Enden, Spinoza's Latin teacher in Amsterdam, with influencing Spinoza on pretty much all the important aspects of his thought. According to Klever, Van den Enden not only inspired Spinoza's political radicalism, but also his pantheism (Klever states that Van den Enden uses the expression "God, or Nature" repeatedly), his determinism, and a mind-body identity theory. Besides being scarce on details on Van den Enden's pantheism (which is understandable in such a short article), Klever does not quite make the case that Spinoza (who was, after all, a young adult when he went to Van den Enden's school) was inspired by Van den Enden's ideas, rather than the other way around.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Klever: "A New Source of Spinozism: Franciscus van den Enden," 1991.

<sup>211</sup> Klever points out, interestingly, that the fact that Van den Enden already had a bad reputation as an atheist, Cartesian and freethinker (hardly compatible, but that did not stop the fervor of the committed defenders of the faith) when Spinoza went to his school. This did not prevent Spinoza from attending his lessons and becoming good friends. This, and the fact that a year (or less) after knowing Van den Enden Spinoza was excommunicated, is evidence (to me) that Spinoza was already independent-minded, and probably did not need Van den Enden to 'lead him astray'. Klever seems to rely too much on the testimony of Olaus Borch, a Danish anatomist whose diary (published in 1983 by Schepelern as *Olai Borrichii Itinerarium 1660-1665: The Journal of the Danish Polyhistor Ole Borch*) contains references to the contacts between Van den Enden and Spinoza, depicting them both as renown atheists and Cartesians, and hinting at the former being the teacher of such heinous doctrines. Besides the fact that the hint (if any) is very subtle, Borch's statements about Spinoza are inaccurate (according to Borch,

After all, the texts Klever refers to were not written until after 1670.<sup>212</sup> More likely, in my opinion, is that the extent of Van den Ende's influence was limited to little more than putting Spinoza in contact with authors such as Seneca or Cicero (and probably also Bruno, Bacon, Hobbes and Galileo) that may have set Spinoza's 'wheels' in motion. Whatever the story, it seems obvious to me (as well to many others, including Klever himself) that the most important influence, the one he always felt he had to reckon with, was Descartes, for good and bad.<sup>213</sup> To offer another 'just so story' (in absence of better evidence), Spinoza must have been struck by Descartes' rigor, his *more geometrico* pronouncements, and the promises of the mechanical philosophy; and, at the same time, he must have been frustrated by finding in Descartes the same adherence to religious tenets that (by now Spinoza was probably convinced) afflicted all other

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Spinoza converted to Christianity at some point and then became an atheist), and therefore make him an unreliable source, unless otherwise corroborated.

<sup>212</sup> Unfortunately the English translation that Klever mentions in his 1991 never materialized, and I do not read Dutch. Hopefully the texts will soon be available. As for their relevance to my discussion there are some doubts. In his *Radical Enlightenment*, Israel convincingly concludes that there is no evidence that Van den Enden held any 'Spinozistic' idea before the '60s, and we know from his correspondence and writings that by that time Spinoza already held many of his most radical tenets, such as the Deus-Natura equivalence and his determinism. See the next chapter for more details.

<sup>213</sup> Both the earliest bibliographers of Spinoza acknowledge Descartes' influence: see J.M. Lucas' *The Oldest Bibliography of Spinoza*, and Colerus' "The Life of Benedictus de Spinoza," in *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*.

philosophers. Endorsement of religious tenets such as transcendence, free will and the immortality of the soul, transformed a promising philosophical system, a system that accounted for the world in terms of *more geometrico* evident statements, into an exercise in philosophical acrobatics to balance contradictory worldviews, such as the dependence of everything on God and transcendence.

#### 4.0 METAPHYSICS IN THE MAKING. CAUSATION AND SUBSTANCE IN *SHORT TREATISE ON GOD, MAN AND WELL BEING*

The analysis in chapter 2 revealed interesting aspects of Spinoza's reading of Descartes. In particular, it revealed that Spinoza saw a tension between accepted causal axioms and two positions he is going to openly refuse in his works: transcendence and antideterminism. In *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza drew two conclusions from Cartesian metaphysics, which we know Descartes at least refused to openly state: that every single existing thing must be contained in God in order for God to cause it, and that all the causal power that things have is in reality God's power. In Spinoza's reading of Descartes, created things have no causal power. So, everything that exists, including changes, exists necessarily because of God's decree,<sup>214</sup> is caused by God, is *contained* in God. How all this can be consistent with freedom of the will, added Spinoza, is a great mystery.

While *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was published in 1663, we know from his correspondence and his previous works that by that time Spinoza held most of the metaphysical tenets endorsed in *Ethics*. In particular, letters to Oldenburg from as early as 1661 contain reference to the theory of substance, the negation of transcendence, and to a philosophical work

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<sup>214</sup> God could not have decreed otherwise, because there is no God prior to his decrees (that would ascribe temporality to God). *Metaphysical Thoughts*.

in which Spinoza defended such positions. In the previous chapter, I offered a brief discussion of two other important elements in Spinoza's background: 16<sup>th</sup> century Scholasticism, represented by Suárez, and a syncretistic attempt at explaining Jewish thought through Scholastic terms and methodology, Herrera's *Gate of Heaven*. In discussing both authors I focused on how both their philosophies are affected by the 'keeping the distance' problem. It is time now to start focusing on Spinoza's solution, and in particular on how he revised the concept of causation and substance in order to build a metaphysics consistent with the causal principles, which would meet the standards of clarity of the mathematical method, and which would not be plagued by inconsistencies created by the demands of religious orthodoxy.

In this part I will follow the use and development of the concepts of causation and substance in Spinoza's pre-*Ethics* writing, in particular *Short Treatise*. Spinoza's *Short Treatise* is a difficult text to read, and made more so by uncertainties about the authorship of parts of it. The best edition that came to us<sup>215</sup> seems to be, at best, a copy of a copy,<sup>216</sup> and, while it is almost certain from their content that several notes in the margins must come from Spinoza, it is by no means clear who is the author of the other notes.<sup>217</sup> To make things more complicated, it is

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<sup>215</sup> The relationship between the two existing manuscripts is also uncertain.

<sup>216</sup> Mignini, "Un documento trascurato della revisione spinoziana del *Breve Trattato*."

There are also contrasting opinions about the original language of the work. According to Gebhart and most scholars (including Mignini and Curley), the work we have is a Dutch translation of a lost original Latin.

<sup>217</sup> See Mignini's and Curley's editions of *Short Treatise*.



unclear how the various parts of the work relate to each other. Some of the parts appear to have been rewritten later, but scholars have conflicting opinions.

According to Mignini's reconstruction, Spinoza wrote *Short Treatise* in mid 1660 at the request of his friends. The work was written in Latin; we know that Spinoza felt uncomfortable writing philosophy in Dutch, most likely because there was no established philosophical lexicon in that language.<sup>218</sup> While Spinoza initially did not have publication plans, his friends encouraged him to change his mind, and he reworked part of the treatise in response to objections and had someone (possibly himself) translate the work in Dutch. Apparently, revisions and *marginalia* were made by Spinoza on the Dutch copy late in 1661. It is between late 1661 and early 1662 that Spinoza abandoned the project to publish the *Short Treatise* and began to work on *Ethics*. Mignini explains the sequences of numbers appearing on the Dutch manuscript as references by Spinoza to what material from *Short Treatise* he was planning to 'recycle' in *Ethics*.

While this work will not deal in depth with the content of *Treatise on the emendation of the Intellect*, I will begin with this short text in order to point out revealing references to what was Spinoza's lifelong goal in elaborating his philosophy.

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<sup>218</sup> See Nadler's *Spinoza: A life*.

#### 4.1 *TREATISE ON THE EMENDATION OF THE INTELLECT:* *THE UNION OF THE MIND WITH NATURE*

Offering conjectures on Spinoza's intellectual biography is risky business, given the scarcity of documents we have, and the conflicting accounts. Older biographies make the case that Spinoza became devoted to natural philosophy *after* he was excommunicated in 1656. However, a more accurate examination of the documents on the part of more modern biographers, such as Klever and Nadler, supports the conclusion that, far from following Spinoza's excommunication, the study of modern natural philosophy energized Spinoza's opposition to traditional theology, and suggested him an alternative, more sensible way to account for the relationship between God and the world.

A recent study by Jonathan Israel offers an interesting hypothesis, which Israel supports with evidence from commercial documents as well as with passages from Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation on the Intellect*. According to Israel, for a few years, following his philosophical rejection of religion, Spinoza tried to hide his detachment from Judaism because he could not give up his family obligations and his financial and social status. The opening of *Treatise on the Emendation on the Intellect* refers to how hard it was for Spinoza to give up such ephemeral goods for the sake of the highest good, even after he realized their imperfections. By 1655 the business of the Spinoza brothers (Bento and Gabriel) was ruined, thanks to repeated losses of cargo ships to the English (Holland and England were at war from 1652 to 1656) and to pirates. In 1655, a crucial confrontation took place between rabbi Morteira on the one side, and Spinoza

and Juan del Prado (another infamous marrano heretic who was excommunicated)<sup>219</sup> on the other, recorded in the writing of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Sephardic Jew poet Levi de Barrios. In this confrontation, Spinoza, who until a few months before had been an impeccable member of the Amsterdam Jewish community, lashed out (philosophically) against a respected defender of orthodoxy, practically forcing (Israel suggests) the Jewish community to expel him, and thus *de facto* ending all his business obligations (because even his debtors were forced to cut contacts with him). Israel makes a cogent case that the disastrous state of his business (though no fault of the Spinozas) could have made the young Baruch realize how fragile such goods as social and financial status truly are, and pushed him over the edge.<sup>220</sup> More importantly, for my purposes, Israel's study contributes to the conclusion that Spinoza's philosophical reflections, and his rejection of orthodoxy (and possibly of the belief in transcendence and in a personal God altogether) must have happened well before the 1656 Cherem.

The fact that Spinoza in 1648, at the age of sixteen, dropped out of the religious school his father had sent him to can be interpreted as a symptom of his early discontent with traditional Jewish theology. Evidence suggests that Spinoza became a member of a circle of friends, the Collegianten, who met regularly to read and discuss the new philosophical trends, especially

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<sup>219</sup> For a good discussion of Juan del Prado and his influence on Spinoza, which was overestimated by earlier scholars such as Gebhard, see Yirmiyahy Yovel's *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, in particular Ch. 3.

<sup>220</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, and "Philosophy, Commerce and the Sinagogue: Spinoza's Expulsion from the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community in 1665," in Israel and Salverda, eds., *Dutch Jewry: its history and secular culture (1500-2000)*.

Descartes. Among these, Jarig Jelles and Pieter Balling were to be lifelong friends for Spinoza.<sup>221</sup>

An important member of the Collegianten was the already mentioned Franciscus van den Enden, a medical doctor who had established a renowned Latin school in his own house. Spinoza became soon aware that proficiency in Latin was a requirement for anyone interested in philosophy, and therefore went to van den Enden's school. Van den Enden, however, was not only famous for his Latin scholarship. Salomon van Til, a Leiden theologian, wrote in 1694 this cheerful piece about van den Enden:

A great instrument for the dispersion of the evil owned the prince of Darkness some years ago in an Amsterdam schoolmaster [van den Enden], who in this turbulent town tried to spread on all occasion his sentiment that *nature had to be considered the only God...*<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> See Nadler's and Klever's biographies of Spinoza.

<sup>222</sup> Quoted in Klever, "Spinoza's life and works"; in Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. After condemning Van den Enden's "Satanic" ideas, the quote goes on with an indictment of Spinoza's intellectual dishonesty and atheism: Spinoza would attract innocent pupils under the pretense of explaining Descartes' philosophy, but he would then sneak in his heresies. Once again, it is unclear how accurate a representation of Van den Enden this is. It certainly is not an accurate representation of Spinoza's philosophical attitude, or intellectual honesty. Many of Van den Enden's (and Spinoza's) opponents tended to ascribe them positions that they considered blasphemous, without particular regard to accuracy or consistency. For

If not before, it is very likely that in van den Enden's house (which he probably began frequenting in 1654-55) Spinoza became acquainted with authors such as Bruno, Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes,<sup>223</sup> Descartes, and the classics of Latin literature.<sup>224</sup> However, let us keep in mind that, if Spinoza was unable to read Latin before he started attending Van den Enden's school, it is unlikely that he had any first hand knowledge of philosophical texts such as Descartes' or Hobbes,' though he probably heard about their ideas from his circle.

Van den Enden was a political activist (which eventually cost him his life when he was hanged in 1674 for his alleged involvement in a plot to kill the French king Louis XIV); he published radical political literature,<sup>225</sup> he was a freethinker, if not an atheist, and there seems to

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example, Olaus Borch, relied upon by Klever, considered Van den Enden and Spinoza Cartesians *and* atheists; never mind that God has a fundamental role in Cartesianism.

<sup>223</sup> A 1647 edition of Hobbes' *De Cive* was found in Spinoza's library.

<sup>224</sup> Several commentators have remarked on the use of expressions lifted from Terence's plays in Spinoza's *Ethics*; see Nadler's *Spinoza: A Life*, and Curley's and Giancotti's edition of Spinoza's works. Van den Enden made his student act in Terence's plays, and it seems that Spinoza took part in those.

<sup>225</sup> From Nadler's biography of Spinoza: "In two philosophical works probably written in the early 1660s, the *Free Political Propositions and Considerations of State*, and *A Short narrative of the New Netherlands' Situation, Virtue, Natural Privileges and Special Aptitudes for Populations*, he (van den Enden) argues-much as Spinoza would in his own political works- for a radically democratic state, one that respects the boundary between political authority and theological belief and in which religious leaders play no role in the government" (page 104). One

be good evidence that he followed eagerly the progress of scientific discoveries, being a medical doctor himself.<sup>226</sup> It is tempting to overestimate the influence that Franciscus van den Enden may have had on the young Spinoza (Spinoza presumably was a frustrated twenty-something when he started out in van den Enden's classes), and it is useful to keep in mind that most of what is said in the literature is conjectural. We have little, if any evidence, at this time, of what books Spinoza may have read, and when.

What we do know, however, is that by 1659-60, when he presumably started out writing his first philosophical work (*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*), Spinoza was surely acquainted with Descartes' works (including a selection of correspondence that was published in Amsterdam in 1650),<sup>227</sup> and most likely with those works by Hobbes which were published in Latin in 1655 and 56: *De Corpore* and *De Homine*.

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can see that, since *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza shared van den Enden's vision for a community of enlightened (and happy) citizens. However, there seems to be disagreement on the actual date of Van den Enden's works. Klever and Israel date them to the late '60s-early '70's.

<sup>226</sup> According to Klever ("Spinoza's life and works"; in Garrett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*), van den Enden often participated in chemical experiments. It is possible, Klever writes, that Spinoza may have tagged along: his correspondence with Boyle via Oldenburg shows that Spinoza had a more than amateurish knowledge of chemistry.

<sup>227</sup> *Renati Descartes Opera Philosophica. Ed. 2a ab auct. recog. omnin meditationis [sic] de prima philosophia, etc.* Amst. Lud. Elzevier 1650; in Spinoza's library, with other works by Descartes. (Servaas van Rooijen, A.J. cur., *Inventaire des livres formant la bibliothèque de*

Whether *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* is prior to *Short Treatise* is still an open question. However, most scholars (Nadler included) agree with Mignini's conclusion on the priority of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.<sup>228</sup> The main reasons to think that *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* is prior to *Short Treatise* are the themes discussed, and the fact that several positions expressed in *Short Treatise* are closer to *Ethics* than *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* is conceived more as a methodological introduction than a full-fledged metaphysical system (which *Short Treatise* obviously aims to be).

One can make interesting comparisons between the beginning of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and the beginning of Cartesian works such as *Discourse on Method* or *Meditations*. It is also interesting that both thinkers began early in their philosophical career a work on method which they left incomplete (see Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*). However, notwithstanding a Cartesian flavor in the initial 'fable' and in some passages on the evidence of clear and distinct ideas, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* offers an understanding of man and nature which is fully anticartesian.

For Spinoza, as well as for Descartes, knowledge is instrumental to happiness. Human happiness, for Spinoza, is grounded on understanding man's place in nature, and on actively creating a society conducive to men learning and sharing such knowledge. Such society, Spinoza believed, would be peaceful and prosperous.

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*Bénédict Spinoza, publié d'après un document inedit.*) According to Nadler, 1999, there is also evidence that Spinoza may have audited classes at the University of Leiden, where the teaching of Cartesian philosophy, notwithstanding decrees forbidding it (as late as 1656), was flourishing.

<sup>228</sup> See Mignini "Un documento trascurato della revisione spinoziana del *Breve Trattato*."

The knowledge that is needed in order to step towards happiness is

The knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature.<sup>229</sup>

The passage can be interpreted as a general statement to the effect that man is part of nature and subject to his laws, or as an anticipation of Spinoza's doctrine that the human mind is a mode of *Deus sive Natura*.<sup>230</sup> Either way, the passage is an anticipation of the much stronger statement, in the Introduction to *Ethics* III, against those who treat man as supernatural, or subnatural:

Most of those who have written about the affects and men's way of living seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself.<sup>231</sup>

A necessary condition of human happiness is the understanding that the human mind is subject to the same necessity and laws as the rest of nature. This, of course, challenges two tenets of traditional religion (and two philosophical positions held by Descartes): free will and, consequently, the existence of an immortal soul that will be rewarded or punished in an afterlife.

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<sup>229</sup> Curley page 11.

<sup>230</sup> I disagree with interpretations that make Spinoza a mystic, and I don't think that this passage supports them in any significant sense.

<sup>231</sup> Curley page 491.



Another criticism of the traditional view on man is in Spinoza's 'disclaimer' on perfection:

For nothing, considered in its own nature, will be called perfect or imperfect, especially after we have recognized that everything that happens happens according to the eternal order, and according to certain laws of nature.<sup>232</sup>

Understanding man's nature means understanding the order and necessity to which man belongs. This, in turn, will help in controlling the emotions and delusions deriving from the belief that man is free and that he must conform to some ideal of moral perfection in order not to be subject to some horrendous punishment in the afterlife.

Understanding Nature is the first step. We can achieve that, Spinoza continued, because we have the ability to know things by their essences and causes.<sup>233</sup> In other words, we can form ideas of things that are true and adequate, i.e. that *adequately* represent the essence of things as they are in nature, and their causal relationship with each other.<sup>234</sup> The method that Spinoza endorsed as a starting point is a reflexive knowledge of a true idea, *qua* true. Because of the characters with which it presents itself, a true idea is the standard of itself and falsity: which is why, for Spinoza, doubt is an epistemic non-starter. Inability to doubt does not imply truth, but simply ignorance of the factors that should make us doubt.

The reason why ideas give us knowledge is that

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<sup>232</sup> Curley page 10.

<sup>233</sup> Curley, vol. I, page 13.

<sup>234</sup> To perceive adequately is to perceive through essences and causes: see Curley, vol. I, page 13.

The relation between the two ideas is the same as the relation between the formal essences of those ideas.<sup>235</sup>

Hence, if the idea of X (say, certain properties of a triangle) follows from the idea of Y (the triangle), this is because X in reality follows from Y, or, given Y, X is necessarily the case.

Because of this, Spinoza introduces his analog of Descartes' *Cogito*, or the idea that is the starting point for epistemically warranted knowledge:

It follows that the reflexive knowledge of the idea of the most perfect Being will be more excellent than the reflexive knowledge of any other idea. That is, the most perfect method will be the one that shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of the given idea of the most perfect being.<sup>236</sup>

While the starting point of the idea of a most perfect being has the role that the *Cogito, ergo sum* has in Cartesian philosophy, it is important to stress the difference between the two. The importance of *Cogito*, for Descartes, was that it offered a paradigm of what a clear and distinct idea should look like. However, Descartes had to arrive at *Cogito* in his search for a clear and distinct idea that could not be doubted. Even traditional standards of clarity and distinctness, such as mathematical or geometrical ideas, were provisionally set aside as dubious given the possibility of the evil demon. Only *Cogito, ergo sum* passed the test. No demon, no matter how evil, powerful or resourceful, could make it the case that someone is thinking and yet not existing; at least not before the *Cogito* and the following proof of the existence of God. We know that the proof is true, because by this time we already have the standard of the *Cogito*.

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<sup>235</sup> Curley, vol. I, page 19.

<sup>236</sup> Curley page 19.

While Spinoza would not question that something that is thinking is something existing (though he denied that this ‘something’ is necessarily a substance), he scoffed at the idea that an actually clear and distinct idea<sup>237</sup> could be doubted, even temporarily. Lack of doubt, for Spinoza, is epistemically irrelevant: we may be unable to doubt the truth of an idea simply because we lack ideas that would make us doubt. In an example introduced in *Ethics*, Spinoza argued that a child does not doubt the existence of something impossible (such as the idea of a winged horse or of the incredible Hulk), until she starts learning things, and acquires ideas that make her first doubt, and eventually reject, what she had earlier accepted as true. However, to doubt an idea that has the marks of being clear and distinct is simply insanity.<sup>238</sup> So, for Spinoza, any idea that is clear and distinct will suffice as a starting point. However, the method suggests that one idea in particular is best.

Because of the parallelism between ideas and things, Spinoza’s starting point, rather than *Cogito ergo sum*, is the idea of God: if all things follow from God, all ideas of things will follow from the adequate idea of God:

For our mind to reproduce completely the likeness (*exemplar*) of Nature, it must bring all of its ideas forth from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature *so that that idea is also the source of other ideas*<sup>239</sup>.

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<sup>237</sup> As opposed to an idea taken as clear and distinct without actually being clear and distinct.

<sup>238</sup> Curley, page 18.

<sup>239</sup> Curley page 20.

Spinoza warns, later in the work, that he is not going to pursue the task of explaining things as they follow from their causes, because “that pertains to Philosophy.” But his claim that ideas follow from ideas the same way things follow from things is repeated at several points.<sup>240</sup> While not much of Spinoza’s metaphysical system is introduced in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, there are references to the power of the intellect and the fact that

The clear and distinct ideas that we form seem to follow so from the necessity of our nature alone that they seem to depend absolutely on our power alone.

This statement may sound like an endorsement of some form of Cartesian innatism (these ideas do not come from outside, hence they belong to the mind; but the mind was created by God; therefore...). However, Spinoza never endorsed innatism, in any traditional sense of the term. In other words, he never believed that God puts the content of such ideas in our minds. Rather, he believed that clear and distinct ideas follow from our power as thinking things:

(The essence of thought) is rather to be sought from the positive properties just surveyed, i.e. we must now establish something common from which these properties necessarily follow...<sup>241</sup>

The properties Spinoza refers to in this passage are the forms of activity of the intellect, in particular its power to form clear and distinct ideas of things ‘under a certain species of

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<sup>240</sup> For example, see Curley pages 24-25.

<sup>241</sup> Curley page 45.

eternity'. Such power, then, *follows from the essence of the human intellect as a thinking thing*.

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It is interesting that Spinoza interrupted *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* exactly at this point. He may have realized that a 'discourse on method' could not be completed unless placed in a metaphysical framework. He may have realized that the best option, given his goal,<sup>243</sup> was to reproduce linguistically how ideas of the whole of Nature follow from the idea of the source of it, and that from an understanding of the essence of God it would necessarily follow an understanding of everything that is caused by him. Of course, this is just a conjecture. But it is a fact that the presuppositions of *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* are not self-evident, and that, as in Descartes' *Meditations*, the epistemic claims needed a metaphysical justification.

What makes the *idea-ideatum* parallelism in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* particularly interesting is the reference to deriving all ideas from the essence of God in order to achieve a perfect "likeness," or *exemplar*, of nature. This implies that the essence of God 'contains' its consequences; that, once God is posited, the nature of the world *necessarily* follows, and that the logical necessity of ideas following ideas is an adequate representation of this necessity (or, as explicated in *Ethics*, it is the *same* necessity). This, of course, amounts to

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<sup>242</sup> Notice that at this point in his intellectual development Spinoza does not yet conceive of essence as power, but as something from which power follows (as properties). As we have seen, Scholastic thinkers such as Heereboord and Burgerdsjik held this position, though for them things still needed God's concurrence in order to be causally active. The development of the concept of essence as power itself will be a very important conceptual shift.

<sup>243</sup> Spinoza was concerned with human happiness, as discussed before: the possibility of happiness hinges on our understanding the role and place of man in nature.

ascribing *necessity* to God's creation, and to positing a relationship between God and the world that was very different from the one posited by Descartes.

If adequate ideas of things in the world are derivable from the idea of God, because things in the world follow from the nature of God, the latter must be such as to contain extension, in a way that makes extension deducible from it. However, traditionally extension was kept far away from God (with a few, vociferously criticized, exceptions such as Thomas Hobbes or Giordano Bruno). The only way God could "contain" extension was *eminently*: by being so much more perfect as to be able to bring it about, to 'take the place' of an extended cause of this extended world.

But how would it be possible to deduce extension from idea of God, if God contains it eminently? One could only deduce it *post facto*, but this is obviously not what Spinoza had in mind in his discussion.<sup>244</sup> The epistemic priority that Spinoza posits for his God would be flawed if we needed to know that extension exists... in order to deduce extension from the essence of God as an effect. The nature of God should be such that we could derive extension from him even if, counterfactually, we had no evidence of the existence of extension.

All this shows that the ideas-things parallelism in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* involves, and is based on, the metaphysical framework sketched in *Short Treatise*:<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, Suárez's discussion of eminent containment had this problem, by Suárez's own admission.

<sup>245</sup> It is also useful to remember that Spinoza makes references to his concept of God as being the only substance and including extension in his letter 2 to Oldenburg, written in late 1661.

ideas represent things *because* both extension and thought are attributes of God, and both what happens in extension and what happens in thought follow from the nature of God. This is a contrast to Descartes' system, where (as I discussed in Chapter 1) the fact that ideas reliably represent things is grounded on the arbitrary decision of God rather than in the essence of things themselves.

## 4.2 SUBSTANCE AND GOD IN *SHORT TREATISE*

Wiep van Bunge<sup>246</sup> argues that Spinoza's philosophy could have dispensed with its metaphysics of substance and attributes. While it is true that contemporary critics of Spinoza (such as Bayle and Spinoza's correspondents van Velthuysen and Van Blyembergh<sup>247</sup>) questioned the necessity and consistency of his monism, the claim that Spinoza 'dispenses' with his metaphysics of substance after part II of *Ethics* (endorsed, for example, by Negri in *The Savage Anomaly*) is unjustified, especially when one considers how Spinoza took pains to argue for the non-substantial status of man, and how relevant all this is to the third kind of knowledge and the conditions for human happiness and that unique brand of "immortality of the soul" that Spinoza maintains, as well as for Spinoza's political philosophy.

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<sup>246</sup> See van Bunge's *From Stevin to Spinoza*.

<sup>247</sup> See Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, article "Spinoza"; van Velthuysen, *Tractatus de Cultu Naturali*; Van Blyembergh, *Wederlegging van de Ethica*; quoted in van Bunge's *From Stevin to Spinoza*, ch. 5.

I mentioned above that the point where *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* was interrupted suggests that Spinoza became aware that both his epistemology and his ethics needed a metaphysical foundation. This foundation is offered for the first time in *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*. The metaphysics of substance offered in this work, far from being irrelevant, was supposed to provide framework and support for positions such as the union of man with nature or the mind/body parallelism that are only postulated in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.

While the beginning of *Short Treatise* is devoted to a proof of the existence of God that is rich in Cartesian themes,<sup>248</sup> soon enough Spinoza proceeds to draw the consequence of what, for him, is the real definition of the term “substance.” Contrary to *Ethics*, *Short Treatise* has no definition of substance. The earliest occurrence of the term is in the first chapter of *Short Treatise*, in a footnote to the proof of the existence of God:

The cause of these changes<sup>249</sup> would have to be either outside of it, or in it. Not outside of it, for no *substance* which, like this one, is in itself *depends* on anything outside it; so it can undergo no change from outside....

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<sup>248</sup> The proof is in two parts: a priori, where existence is drawn from God’s essence, and a posteriori, from the fact that we have an idea of God.

<sup>249</sup> The author refers to changes to a greater or lesser perfection. Spinoza is explaining God’s *propria*, among which immutability. On the distinction between *propria* and attributes, see Deleuze’s *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.



The substance Spinoza referred to in this passage is God. While a definition of substance is lacking, Spinoza's expression "is in itself" arguably presupposes a definition close to the one offered by Descartes in *The Principles of Philosophy*:

By *substance*, we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to *depend* on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance, which can be understood to *depend* on no other thing whatsoever, namely God.<sup>250</sup>

Of course the footnote leaves open the possibility of a substance that does not exist by itself. Spinoza will reject this option later, in discussing what God is.

Spinoza then began *Short Treatise*'s discussion of the substance *par excellence* assuming a basic concept of substance that any metaphysician, starting from Aristotle,<sup>251</sup> could have agreed on. Then he proceeded to show, assuming a concept of causation based on the causal containment principle and on the principle of plenitude, that the only consistent picture of this world is a monist picture; or, better yet, *his* monist picture, where everything that exists is a manifestation of the power of God, following *necessarily* from God's nature.

The basic idea in the containment principle (that an effect must be somehow contained in its cause) in itself is compatible with the rejection of determinism and monism. I am going to

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<sup>250</sup> CSM, II, 210. My italics. Notice, in both Descartes' definition and the footnote from *Short Treatise*, the insistence on ontological independence.

<sup>251</sup> See, for example, Aristotle's discussion in *Metaphysics*, book Z 1, where, in opposing substance to the other categories of being such as quality, he refers primarily to the substance's ontological independence.

show, in the following sections, that Spinoza added to a strong interpretation of containment the principle of plenitude (as Lovejoy called it), or the idea that all that is conceived by God as potentially existing must also be actual, that God cannot ‘hold back’ and abstain from creating all that he can create. Determinism and immanence are implied in the junction of Spinoza’s concept of causation. They just need to be explicated through an appropriate method of exposition, which Spinoza will develop fully in *Ethics*.<sup>252</sup>

In other words, rejecting transcendence and rejecting indeterminism are necessary conditions of a worldview consistent with metaphysical assumption on substance and causation that (Spinoza believed) should be shared by anyone who had some philosophical depth. Of course, there is an explanation for why most humans insist in believing in transcendence. It is a psychological explanation that is only sketched in the pre-*Ethics* works, and is developed only in *Ethics*, discussing human emotions in the same geometrical order used to discuss the nature of God or the behavior of bodies.

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<sup>252</sup> Woolhouse’s discussion of the method of exposition of *Ethics* (in *Descartes Spinoza Leibniz-The concept of Substance in Seventeen Century Metaphysics*) points to a passage where Descartes, answering Mersenne’s objections to his *Meditations*, remarks that in the synthetic method of demonstration “it can be shown at once that it (the conclusion) is contained in what has gone before” (CSM II, 111). While we don’t have an equally outspoken statement from Spinoza, it seems quite clear that for him the geometrical order, through its linguistic representation of logical, and therefore causal, containment, had an unparalleled epistemic legitimacy.

### 4.3 CAUSATION AND SUBSTANCE MONISM: THE ARGUMENT IN *SHORT TREATISE*

The second part of *Short Treatise* is devoted to demonstrating the nature of God from the concept of substance. It proceeds through the following series of steps.

- Substance is infinite.<sup>253</sup>

A substance is limited through itself, or through its cause. But a substance limiting itself would change its essence, which is impossible.<sup>254</sup> On the other hand, it is impossible for a substance to be limited because of an external creating cause. Because God must create everything that he conceives as possible, if God creates a limited substance, this would mean that either his power is limited, or that, being able to create an infinite substance, he chooses not to. Either way, we have a conflict with the omnipotent and omnibenevolent nature of God.<sup>255</sup>

Philosophically, this follows from what A.J. Lovejoy, in his landmark work *The Great Chain of Being*, dubbed the “principle of plenitude,” which was consistently endorsed by

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<sup>253</sup> Curley, vol. I page 66. Also see Lovejoy’s discussion on the principle of plenitude in *The Great Chain of Being*.

<sup>254</sup> Notice the unstated assumption that, for a substance to be limited, there needs to be a cause of its limitation.

<sup>255</sup> While Spinoza rejected the concept of a personal God, the language of *Short Treatise* does on occasion use anthropomorphic adjectives (such as ‘generosity’ or ‘envy’) to express the principle of plenitude.

Spinoza, as Lovejoy showed, and as I will discuss soon.<sup>256</sup> In addition, a limited substance would share with nothing, which is a contradiction.<sup>257</sup>

- There cannot be more than one substance of the same kind.

Otherwise, they would limit each other, which would contradict the previous conclusion because there would then exist a *limited* substance.

From all this it follows that

- No substance can produce another substance.

A substance cannot produce a substance of the same kind, or there would be two substances of the same kind, which would violate the preceding argument; a substance cannot produce a substance of a different kind, or the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom would be violated (the second substance would have something that was not in its cause, hence it would have it from nothing). Notice that this argument also rules out causal interaction between distinct substances, or substances having different attributes. At this point Spinoza can conclude that

- There cannot be a plurality of substances with different attributes.

Spinoza argues that an infinite substance such as God must have *all* the attributes, and that only substance monism allows for the unity that we experience in nature:

we have already found that there must be an infinite and perfect being, by which nothing else can be understood but “*a being of which all in all must be*

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<sup>256</sup> I do disagree with Lovejoy’s interpretation of Spinoza’s use of the principle of plenitude, however. I will discuss why in the next chapter.

<sup>257</sup> A substance can only have *esse* from its cause. Where would the limitations come? From nothing. But nothing comes from nothing (*nihil ex nihilo*).

*predicated.*” For, of a being which has some essence, some attributes must be predicated, and the more essence one ascribes to it, the more attributes one must also ascribe to it. So, if a being is infinite, its attributes must also be infinite, and that is precisely what we call a perfect being.

Because of the unity which we see everywhere in nature: if there were different beings<sup>258</sup> in nature, the one could not possibly unite with the other.<sup>259</sup>

Therefore:

no substance is caused by something external to it, nor can it cause something that is really distinct from it, and only one substance exists, having all possible attributes.<sup>260</sup>

Anything caused by a substance must be a mode of that substance.

Some interpreters (most recently, Saccaro Del Buffa) argue that at this stage of his intellectual development Spinoza was not a monist, i.e. did not believe that there is only one substance, God or Nature. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Saccaro Del Buffa identifies Spinoza’s God with Herrera’s Ein Sof, or the one before the emanation of the Sefirot. For

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<sup>258</sup> By “beings” here Spinoza meant substances. The language at some points of *Short Treatise* is sloppier than the language in *Ethics*.

<sup>259</sup> Curley vol. I pages 69-70. Also, page 75.

<sup>260</sup> Bennett argues in his 1984 that Spinoza did not believe there were attributes other than thought and extension. However, *Short Treatise* and letters posterior to it mention “infinite” attributes, which would not make sense if Spinoza believed that only two attributes are possible. Bennett’s interpretation of “infinite” as “all possible” is unwarranted.

Saccaro Del Buffa, God is a being which comprises in himself, and somehow transcends, the infinite attribute-substances. In other words, there are substances such as extension, thought, and infinite others, each infinite in its own kind; and there is God, pure being, which encompasses and somehow emanates the totality of them.

I do not intend to evaluate Saccaro del Buffa's or Gueroult's arguments in depth.<sup>261</sup> I will simply point out that their interpretation, besides ascribing to Spinoza a position bordering on incoherency, conflicts with a few important passages in which Spinoza, in *Short Treatise*, discusses the nature of God. One is the passage above, in which Spinoza defines God as the being "of which all in all must be predicated." It seems to me hardly plausible that Spinoza would have intended that these infinite substances are "predicated" of God. Traditionally,<sup>262</sup> substance is what is not predicated of anything else. Besides, right after this sentence, Spinoza explains that it is necessary to predicate "all" of this being (God) exactly because the more *attributes* a being has, the more essence and reality it has. Therefore, each and every attribute must be predicated of God. It seems quite clear to me that here Spinoza meant exactly what he wrote; and it is important to remember that he consistently repeated this argument in *Ethics* and his correspondence.

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<sup>261</sup> For an alternative interpretation and a criticism of Saccaro Del Buffa's position, see Francesca di Poppa, "Spinoza on Substances and Attributes in *Short Treatise*," in manuscript.

<sup>262</sup> Descartes also endorsed this definition of substance, in *The Principles of Philosophy*.

See Ch. 1.

Referring to extension a few paragraphs later,<sup>263</sup> Spinoza calls it an attribute (not a substance) of God. More interestingly, in a footnote he wrote:

I.e. if there were different substances which were not related to one single being, then their union would be impossible, because we see clearly that they have absolutely nothing in common with one another-like thought and extension, of which we nonetheless consist.

While this may sound like an endorsement of the view that Saccaro Del Buffa ascribes to Spinoza, once we put it in context, the note does nothing more than refute Descartes' dualism. The following footnote establishes this. It is a note to a passage where Spinoza states a position that he will maintain all his life: that in "substances" such as thought and extension, as long as they are conceived independently (i.e. as opposed to being in something else), there is no necessity of existence, even though we do know from other sources that extension and thought exist. In other words, if we conceive extension and thought as independent substances, we cannot prove that they can exist. Therefore,

If no substance can be other than real, and nevertheless no existence follows from its essence as it is conceived separately, it follows that it is not something singular, but *must be something that is an attribute of another*, viz. the one, unique universal being. Or thus: every substance is real, and the existence of a substance, conceived in itself, does not follow from its essence. So *no real substance can be conceived in itself: instead, it must belong to something else*. I.e. when our intellect understands substantial thought and extension we understand them only in their essence and not in their existence, i.e. [we do not understand]

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<sup>263</sup> Curley page 70.

that their existence necessarily belongs to their essence. But when we prove that they are *attributes* of God we thereby prove *a priori* that they exist, and *a posteriori* (in relation to extension alone) [that it exists] from the modes that must have it as their subject.<sup>264</sup>

The writing in this passage is obscure, and the use of the terms “substance” and “attribute” is ambiguous. However, far from making the case that Spinoza believed in a God composed by infinite substances (infinite extension, infinite thought, etc), this passage can be more easily read as questioning the very possibility of considering extension and thought as substances. For, Spinoza asked, if such substances existed separately and independently of each other, without inhering to a common ontological subject, how could the unity that “we see everywhere in nature” take place?<sup>265</sup> Moreover, Spinoza shows the limitation of Descartes’ *a posteriori* proof of the existence of extended and thinking substance (though here he mentions only extension): we can prove that extension exists because of the modes we know of (such as our body), but this does not really give us an explanation of the existence of the substance. In other words, we know that extended substance exists, but we do not know why. However, if we prove its existence *a priori*, qua attribute of God, then our knowledge of it is more adequate, because from the concept of extension as an attribute belonging to an infinite essence the existence itself of extension follows unproblematically.

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<sup>264</sup> Curley p. 70.

<sup>265</sup> Let us remember that Descartes never explained the mind-body union. In his letter to princess Elizabeth he considers it a primitive, not analyzable in terms of mind or body. See chapter 1.



Again: it is true that Spinoza's language is ambiguous. However, let us keep in mind that *Short Treatise* was never revised for publication. We can interpret Spinoza's use of "substance" in the passage above translating it with a "what some [the Cartesians] call substance" (such as extension and thought): in which case, Spinoza's claim would be straightforward ("What some people call substance is in reality nothing but an attribute of the one infinite substance, God"). Or, we can take Spinoza as literally meaning that God is composed of infinite substances, undermining his claim that there can be only one... substance, which he makes in *Short Treatise*. Personally, I find the former interpretative strategy more fruitful.

Let us go back to the analysis of the argument in *Short Treatise*. After establishing that God is the only substance, in which infinitely many attributes inhere, Spinoza offers another criticism of traditional creationism: if a substance creates another substance, the former must somehow be *diminished*, which is impossible,<sup>266</sup> or would remain the same after giving out something of itself-which is impossible as well.

The above summarized argument tells us interesting things about Spinoza's model of causation, even though he does not discuss it explicitly. Firstly, it shows that Spinoza relied on a very strong interpretation of the causal containment principle. The impossibility of traditional creation, the fact that all that is caused by God (the only substance) are modes inhering in God and immanently caused by God, depends completely on interpreting causation according to a strong containment model, based on the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom.

Here is why. If effects are contained in the cause, causal activity takes something out of the cause's power and nature. If the cause is a substance, this is a *non-sequitur*:

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<sup>266</sup> Impossible because it would involve a change in its essence.

Furthermore, what is created has not in any way proceeded from Nothing, but must necessarily have been created by him who exists. But that something should have proceeded from him and that afterwards he should still have it no less than before-this we cannot conceive with our intellect.<sup>267</sup>

Given the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom, whatever the effect has must come from the cause: hence, it must have been previously contained in the cause. The argument shows that Spinoza endorsed and used an almost literal interpretation of the term “causal *containment*.” If something contained in the cause becomes a real,<sup>268</sup> separate effect, the cause is necessarily diminished in what it passed on to its effect; because what was contained in the cause is not contained in it any longer. However, if the cause is a substance such as God, which is simple and unchangeable, this just cannot logically be.

In a later section of *Short Treatise* (Chapter XVI, “On the Will”) Spinoza adds an argument against free will that can be extended to problematize substance pluralism. This argument is interestingly relevant to my discussion on divine concurrence. While admitting that he has no intention to exhaustively treat the issue, Spinoza briefly points out the kind of inconsistency I discussed in the previous section:

...I shall only show briefly that Freedom of the Will is completely inconsistent with a continuous creation, viz. that the same action is required in God to preserve [a thing] in being as to create it, and that without this action the thing could not exist for a moment. If this is so, nothing could be attributed to [the

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<sup>267</sup> Curley vol. I page 68.

<sup>268</sup> ‘Real’ as opposed to ‘modal’, which is not separate.

will]. But one must say that God has created it as it is; *for since it has no power to preserve itself while it exist, much less can it produce something through itself.*<sup>269</sup>

If someone should say, therefore, that the soul produces the volition itself, I ask: from what power? Not from that which was, for that no longer exists. Nor from that which it now has, for it does not have any by which it could exist or endure for the least moment... So, *because there is no thing which has any power to preserve itself, or to produce anything, the only conclusion left is that God alone is, and must be, the cause of all things, and that Volitions are determined through him.*<sup>270</sup>

If God cannot create any separate substance, it follows that the only substance is God (a conclusion for which Spinoza gave other arguments); and if God cannot create anything separately, no substance can (even if, counterfactually, there were substances other than God). For it is not possible that another substance could do what God cannot do. A less strong interpretation of the containment principle,<sup>271</sup> such as Suárez's, or Descartes', would allow for the creation of limited substances. This would involve a violation of the principle of plenitude,

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<sup>269</sup> Compare with Suárez's argument for divine concurrence. Of course, Suárez did endorse free will, which is why he insisted on the position that created things are still principal causes of their effects.

<sup>270</sup> Curley, 123.

<sup>271</sup> By this I mean an interpretation that allows a cause to pass on something to its effect and still be as perfect as before, and that allows for eminent containment.

but we know that Suárez, Descartes, or Herrera did not accept this principle. For Spinoza (as we will see), it was necessary for a coherent definition of God.

The conclusion is that, under penalty of contradiction, a substance cannot create anything that is separated from itself. A substance can cause only *immanently*. Yet, given Spinoza's strong interpretation of the containment principle (the one that is only compatible with monism and immanent causation), he needed to offer an explanation of why exactly this unique substance would cause something that, though not substantially separated from it, would still be, *qua* caused, somehow different from its cause. In other words, why the infinite multitude of modes, rather than some sort of Parmenidean state in which all being is One, there is no multiplicity and no diversity? The principle of plenitude offers this explanation, when joined to the strong containment principle in a model of causation that can fully found substance monism.

In *Short Treatise*, all of reality is “predicated” of God:

From all of these it follows that of Nature *all in all is predicated*, and that this Nature consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in its own kind.

This agrees perfectly with the definition one gives of God<sup>272</sup>.

The definition of God that Spinoza refers to is the definition of God as “a being of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated, each of which is infinitely perfect in its own kind.”<sup>273</sup>

Since Spinoza just proved that there is only one substance, and that this substance is the first

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<sup>272</sup> Curley vol. I page 68.

<sup>273</sup> Curley vol. I, page 65. Spinoza's offering a definition of God and then a proof of such definition shows that he was not following the *ordo geometricum* as he would later do in *Ethics*.

cause of all of reality (this being generally agreed upon), the attributes of this substance must be such as to explain the whole of reality as *immanently* caused by it.

A consequence of this is that extension must be an attribute of the divine substance. Spinoza devoted the last part of Chapter 2 to rejecting arguments against this position. The reason to reject extension as an attribute of God, in the philosophical tradition rejected by Spinoza (which included Descartes), is that it is an imperfection, because it involves divisibility and passivity.<sup>274</sup> Spinoza challenged this position, claiming that, while extended *modes* are divisible and acted upon, this is not the case with extended substance. In other words, the distinction between parts is *modal*, never *real*, so no extended substance can be divisible.

Spinoza's argument could only be accepted in a monist framework. Any philosopher committed to a plurality of created material substances would have to accept that real divisibility is an actual property of matter.<sup>275</sup> Such a philosopher would have to explain how God could have created something extended and divisible while not being extended himself: the answer was in the concept of eminent causation, a concept that for Spinoza was a *non sequitur*. From Spinoza's rejection of eminent containment it follows that, if God is the cause of extended things, then extension must belong to God *formally*; and all this, we will see, depends on the principle of plenitude. In his argument denying that there can be finite substances, Spinoza implicitly rejects the option of eminent containment:

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<sup>274</sup> See discussion in Ch. 2. To sum up, divisibility conflicts with divine simplicity, and implies an ontological dependence (on parts) which is inadmissible in God.

<sup>275</sup> For example, see Descartes, *Principles* I, 60; CSM, II, 213.

That there cannot be a limited substance is also clear from this, that such a substance would necessarily have to have something which it had from Nothing. But this is impossible. *For where does it have that in which it differs from God?* Never from God, for God has nothing imperfect or limited etc....<sup>276</sup>

A substance with imperfections would have to receive those from *nothing*, which is impossible. In this argument, Spinoza rejected the traditional idea that God can create imperfect things *because* he is infinitely more perfect, which is the idea grounding eminent causation. The argument explicitly invokes the similarity principle (God, being infinite and perfect, cannot create what is limited and imperfect); but this application of the similarity principle is based on the principle of plenitude, which states that God cannot set limits to his power of creating (which is why he cannot create a finite substance).

A more explicit rejection of the idea of eminent containment is in this passage expanding on the same argument:

Concerning the third, the one substance cannot produce another, if someone wishes to maintain the contrary, we ask whether the causes which would have to produce this substance has the same attributes as the one produced or not?

Not the latter, for something cannot come from Nothing. Therefore, the former, and then we ask again, whether, in that attribute, which would be the cause of what is produced, *there is as much perfection* as in what is produced, or *more, or less?* We say there cannot be less, for the reason already given. *We also*

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<sup>276</sup> Curley vol. I page 66.

*say there cannot be more, because then these two would be limited, which is contrary to what we have just proven.*<sup>277</sup>

If a substance with more perfection creates a substance with less perfection, this would involve limitation in the created substance (the one with less perfection), as well as a limitation in the creating substance. In fact, only a substance with limited powers could create something limited: otherwise, we would have a violation of the principle of plenitude. Notice that the argument is not based on the causal similarity principle: the causal similarity principle is compatible with the concept of eminent causation (as we have seen in Descartes), the principle of plenitude is not. So, for Spinoza, eminent causation is contradictory with an infinite nature such as God's. He turned the argument upside down: for Descartes, Suárez and others who endorsed eminent causation, God could cause lesser substances *because* of his infinitely perfect nature,<sup>278</sup> while for Spinoza God's infinitely perfect nature is the reason why God *cannot* create lesser substances. The adoption of the principle of plenitude involves the rejection of the idea of eminent containment.

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<sup>277</sup> Curley, vol. I, page 67-78.

<sup>278</sup> See letter to Mesland (May 2, 1644), discussed in Ch. 1. In this letter, Descartes responds to an objection to the more general principle that "what is more perfect can create the less perfect because of its superior perfection." Descartes' response is that finite and limited causes cannot bring about everything that is less perfect (for example, humans cannot give birth to rocks), while a universal and infinite cause can bring about everything that is lesser and limited.

#### 4.4 DETERMINISM, ESSENCE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PLENITUDE

Spinoza's argument against eminent containment shows again that there is more, to his concept of causation, than the causal axiom *nihil ex nihilo* and the causal principles (containment and similarity) following from it. The principle of plenitude plays a fundamental role in justifying monism: it is because of the principle of plenitude that Spinoza can reject the idea that God creates limited, less perfect substances. The principle states that God must create all that it is in his power to create; in other words, all that is possible must be actual.<sup>279</sup> As a consequence, as we have seen, it is not possible for God to intentionally limit his creative power.

The principle of plenitude is also the foundation of Spinoza's argument for determinism. The containment principle in itself endorsed by Descartes and Suárez, does not involve a monist metaphysics,<sup>280</sup> even less determinism. Lovejoy showed, in *The Great Chain of Being*, several metaphysical systems in which the principle of plenitude is paired with indeterminism, transcendence or both.

Implicit or explicit endorsements of the principle of plenitude abound in *Ethics*, as Lovejoy has shown, and are present in *Short Treatise* as well. In particular, Spinoza's argument for the unity of intellect and power in God rejects the possibility that God can conceive of something without creating it at the same time. Here is a passage where Spinoza articulately rejects the main argument *opposing* the principle of plenitude:

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<sup>279</sup> Curley, vol. I, page 68.

<sup>280</sup> Of course, as we have seen earlier, Spinoza's interpretation of causal containment was much stronger than Descartes' or Suárez's.



Some want to argue against what we just said-that no thing is in God's infinite intellect unless it exists formally in Nature- in the following way: if God had created everything, then he cannot create more. But that he should not be able to create more would be contrary to his omnipotence. Therefore.<sup>281</sup>

Regarding the first point, we grant that God cannot create more. As for the second, we acknowledge that if God could not create everything that is creatable, that would be contrary to his omnipotence; but it is not in any way contrary to it if he cannot create what is contradictory in itself (as it is to say that he has created everything and could still create more).

And certainly it is a much greater perfection in God that he has created everything that was in his infinite intellect, than it would be if he had not created it and (as they say) never would have...

But if God has everything in his intellect and through his infinite perfection cannot know more, why cannot we say that he has also produced everything he had in his intellect, and brought it about that it is, or will be, formally in Nature?<sup>282</sup>

Claiming that God could have not created everything that he conceives, and that is in his power to create, contradicts God's perfection, omnipotence and infinity, as well as the doctrine of the unity of intellect and will (because God would 'will' something different from what he

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<sup>281</sup> "Therefore" is for Q.E.D.

<sup>282</sup> Curley vol. I page 68-69. Compare with Herrera's rejection of this argument, in previous chapter.

understands). An expanded discussion of the principle of plenitude, and of how it involves both determinism and the negation of transcendence, is found in Chapter 4 of *Short Treatise*, entitled “Of God’s necessary actions.”<sup>283</sup> Spinoza explains that the idea that God must be free to create or not to create what he has an idea of comes from a misunderstanding about the nature of freedom:

True freedom is nothing but *being the first cause, which is not in any way constrained by anything else*, and only through its perfection is the cause of all perfection. So, if God could omit doing this, he would not be perfect. For to be able to omit doing good or bringing about perfection in what he produced can only be thought a defect.<sup>284</sup>

If something is conceivable as existing, and God does not create it, the non-creation can only be explained by some cause which is external to God:<sup>285</sup> but this is a contradiction, because nothing can act on God. Alternatively, one would have to conclude that God is less than perfect, which is also a contradiction. In this part of *Short Treatise*, Spinoza explicates how the principle of plenitude follows from the nature of God as the only substance which is infinite. Because there is nothing outside of God that can affect him, God is free, and everything that God does, or

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<sup>283</sup> The titles of some chapters are supplied by interpreters, while chapter 4 was given a title in the manuscripts.

<sup>284</sup> Curley vol. I page 82.

<sup>285</sup> If something is not created by God because of reasons internal to God himself, that simply means that the non-created thing was self-contradictory by its nature, and therefore was not conceivable as existing to begin with.

does not do, must be explained through his infinite nature.<sup>286</sup> But such nature cannot explain limitations.

In the passages where he discusses God's necessity, predestination and liberty, Spinoza exposed the inconsistencies of the traditional concept of God who 'could have not created.' In the previous chapter, I offered an analysis of Suárez's discussion, showing that such inconsistency truly exists, the reason for it being that Suárez (following traditional theology) placed a gap between God's essence and its effects. The same gap is placed between the essence of individual things and their effects, and in this case it is a double gap: essences are separated from their powers, and the powers are separated from their effects (because God's concurrence is needed for these effects to actually occur.)

Like his predecessors, Spinoza eliminates any gap between God's essence and his powers. We will see that, in *Ethics*, he defines the essence of God, as well as the essence of created things, as causal power itself. In Suárez, Burgerdsjik and Heereboord the essence of a created thing is something that is above and beyond what it causes, and on which its causal powers are ontologically based; in Spinoza, the essence of a thing *is* its power to cause.

We do not have much textual evidence that Spinoza had already made this conceptual shift by the time he wrote *Short Treatise*. However, a short passage may offer support to the hypothesis that such a shift was at least in the making. In discussing passions, freedom and the intellectual love of God, Spinoza wrote

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<sup>286</sup> So Spinoza rejects the idea that there may be objective moral good or evil independent of God's nature and dictating God's creation.

*The more essence a thing has, the more it also has of action and the less of passion.* For it is certain that the agent acts through what he has, and that the one who is acted on acts through what he does not have.<sup>287</sup>

Spinoza did not elaborate here on the meaning of this “the more essence something has, the more active it is”; neither does he offer an argument for this statement. However, such argument can be construed based on the case of God: because God’s essence is infinite, so is his power, and this is why he is the infinite first cause. But in God essence and power are one. It is because of his infinite power that God is infinitely *active* (there is no passive power in God). Exactly as stated in the above quote, God is active because of *what he has*, and cannot be passive *because there is nothing he does not have*. So, the fact that an infinite essence and power are one in God explains his being infinitely active. *Mutatis mutandis* (finite things are, well, finite) we can conclude that, for Spinoza, essence is one with power in finite things too; otherwise, Spinoza would have had no reason to make the claim contained in the above quote. In God, the validity of the claim hinges on the equivalence essence/power; in finite things, if that equivalence did not apply, we would need a different argument to support the claim that the more essence something has the more its active powers. But we are not offered a different argument; so, we can assume (I believe) that the equivalence essence/active power applies to finite things as well.

Regardless of the strength of this argument, this short quote makes one think that, even at this stage, for Spinoza essence and causal power are one. What acts, acts because of its essence. No separation exists between essence and active causation. Essence is also necessarily related to passive causation; what is acted upon acts “through what it does not have,” a tortuous way to say that what does not have much essence is necessarily passive.

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<sup>287</sup> Curley, 147.

But if essence is conceived as *that from which one's effects necessarily follow*, as is obviously the case in Spinoza's discussion of God, then the principle of plenitude necessarily applies, because, as Spinoza insists, God just cannot 'hold back' and will *not* to create everything that is in his power. So, the principle of plenitude follows from Spinoza's equating God's essence with his power and activity, without the gap traditionally inserted between God's power and God's action (free will). In the next chapter, we will see how in *Ethics* this re-elaboration of the concept of essence, together with what I call the "strong containment principle," become tied together in a new model, based on the concept causation as of expression of one's essence.

Let us summarize the previous discussion on the essence of God. Given that God exists, that he is infinitely perfect, and that nothing outside of God can put limits on his power (a concept that everybody would agree to), God must cause everything that is in his power to cause (principle of plenitude). Therefore, it cannot be the case that God would limit his power and create a finite substance. Besides, because the effect must be contained in the cause, if God created another substance (i.e., by definition, something that is ontologically independent), the latter would not be contained in him any more, and this would involve a change in the nature of God, which is absurd. So, God can only immanently cause, and everything that exists exists *in* God: we have a case for monism. This outline shows the dependence of Spinoza's substance monism on the new model of causation that he developed by joining the principle of plenitude to the containment principle, and to the definition of substance as something ontologically independent.

In *Short Treatise* determinism, which Spinoza openly endorsed since *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, is also based on the elements that ground the principle of plenitude. The passage from the strong interpretation of containment to determinism is not to be taken for

granted. The basic containment principle, in itself, is perfectly compatible with the *negation* of the principle of plenitude and of determinism, as Descartes, Suárez, and many others had shown.<sup>288</sup> It is perfectly conceivable that a cause could *contain* its effects and yet choose not to bring them about. However, from the containment principle *and* the principle of plenitude (which, for Spinoza, is based on the nature of God) it follows as well that God creates necessarily, and that there is no room for indeterminism.<sup>289</sup> The next chapter in *Short Treatise* makes the case that the endorsement of contingency is nothing more than an admission of ignorance:

If something has no cause of its existence, it is impossible for it to exist.

Something that is contingent has no cause. Therefore.

The first premise is beyond any dispute. The second we prove as follows:

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<sup>288</sup> We have seen that, in the cases of Suárez and Herrera, the rejection of the principle of plenitude is problematic. An interesting elaboration on the relation between the principle of plenitude and the containment model will be offered by Leibniz with his notion of “compossibility” (*On the Radical Origination of Things*, 1697, and *Essays on Theodicy*, 1710).

<sup>289</sup> If God “changed his mind” at some point, Spinoza argued, that would involve that God changed his essence (and his perfection), which is a contradiction in terms.

If something that is contingent has a determinate and certain cause of its existence, then it must exist necessarily. But that something should be both contingent and necessary is self-contradictory. Therefore.<sup>290</sup>

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION: GOD'S PRODUCTIVITY

The 'building bricks' of Spinoza's discussion (the doctrine of substance as ontologically independent, the doctrine of the equivalence of God's essence with his power, and the containment principle) can all be found in the Scholastic tradition, as well as in the syncretistic elaboration of Kabbalah and Scholasticism in Herrera's *Gate of Heaven*. However, Spinoza inferred from these principles what no one else, because of doctrinal constraints, had inferred before him. Spinoza endorsed the principle of plenitude and used it, together with a strong version of the containment principle (following from the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom), to show that God creates whatever is conceivably existing, and that such causal action on the part of God is *deterministic* and *immanent*. The negation of transcendence, the "union of the soul with Nature," and the claim that everything follows necessarily from the nature of God, all concepts endorsed without argument in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, now belong to a metaphysical system based on a set of definitions and axioms that Spinoza considered self-evident and universally acceptable (at least, acceptable for anyone who is philosophically minded).

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<sup>290</sup> Curley vol. I page 85. Spinoza goes on to reject the counterargument that something may be contingent because of its cause: to do so, he claims, would be to beg the question, because what would make the cause contingent?

However, there remains an open question. The doctrines of substance and the principle of causal containment in themselves do not explain the passage from an infinite substance to an infinitely *active* substance. The principle of plenitude tells us that God brings about everything that he conceives as possible. However, we do not have an argument explaining why God causes at all. Whatever the nature of God, why is God active and *productive* (as extended and as thinking substance) to begin with? While we understand that God is infinitely powerful, why would God exercise his power to conceive and to bring about things? Why couldn't he simply "think of himself," as Aristotle's God, for example? While Aristotle's God in *Metaphysics* Λ is pure activity as well, this activity is pure thought, not production. Why is Spinoza's God productive?

Spinoza rejected explanations of God's actions based on free will and goals. His God is self-determined. There is nothing outside God that can explain God's activity. This means that the fact that God brings about things must be explained by God's own essence, and not by factors external to, or independent of, God, such as, for example, goals. Spinoza's suggestion, in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, that we need to start out from an adequate idea of God refers to the fact that this idea is the source of the *whole* of nature, thus leaving no room for causes (such as final causes) external to God:

For our mind to reproduce completely the likeness (*exemplar*) of Nature, it must bring all of its ideas forth *from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature* so that that idea is also the source of other ideas.<sup>291</sup>

In order to think of God as the source of everything that exists, we must consider God as pure *activity*, be it the power to think or the power to create (which are one and the same). So,

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<sup>291</sup> Curley page 20.



the essence of God must be the essence of something that is infinitely active in infinite ways, if it is to be the essence of the cause of everything.<sup>292</sup> Such essence, or an adequate idea thereof, is the starting point of the ‘real’ philosophy. We have seen that, for Spinoza, conceiving of essence as power is a consequence of simplifying the notion of essence, bringing down all the ontological barriers separating an essence from its effects (barriers such as conceiving of powers as something superadded to, or emanating from, the essence). We have seen that, for Scholastic thinkers, the division between an essence and its effects was necessary in order to preserve free will (both in God and in created things). Free will, which Descartes considered an unquestionable reality, was a casualty Spinoza was happy to accept.

So, Spinoza ended up with a notion of essence (for both God and finite things) that is incompatible with free will. But what was his starting point in elaborating this notion of essence?

While philosophy must start from the idea of God, there is something that for Spinoza is more basic. It is what puts constraints on what God, or God’s essence, ‘must be like’ to make philosophical sense. This primitive, basic factor would be our experience of living in a world of bodies in motion, and of representations of such bodies. So, God’s essence and its definition must be such as to account for God creating a world of bodies in motion, bodies that only have those properties that can be described by geometry (e.g. shape and size), consistently with the general tenets of the mechanical philosophy. Spinoza criticized Descartes’ definition of extended substance because it was not able to explain what extended substance does, what *we experience it as doing*: i.e., being in states of motion and rest.

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<sup>292</sup> On God’s power, see Ch. 1 “That God exists.” In Appendix II (Curley, page 151)

Spinoza introduces the concept of *causa sui*, but does not relate it to essence as power. I will discuss *causa sui* in the next chapter.

The further objection may be made, however, that there must necessarily be a first cause which makes this body move; for when it is at rest, it cannot possibly move itself. And *since it is clear that there is motion and rest in nature*,<sup>293</sup> these must, they think, come from an external cause.

But it is easy for us to answer this. For we grant that if body were a thing existing through itself, and had no other property than length, breadth, and depth, then if it really were at rest there would be no cause in it for it to begin to move itself. But we have posited above that Nature is a being of which all attributes are predicated. This being so, nothing can be lacking to it to produce everything that there is to produce.<sup>294</sup>

For Spinoza, a proper definition is one that allows you to derive the properties of the thing defined. The reason why traditional definitions of God, such as “the supreme Being,” were not good definitions is that they did not allow a philosopher to deduce God’s properties, or

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<sup>293</sup> This passage shows clearly that Spinoza took the reality of matter, motion and rest for granted, and did not feel the need to argue against an idealistic, Parmenidean metaphysics where these things are simply appearances. An analogous case where ‘what we perceive in nature’ is considered a given is offered in *Short Treatise* to argue that there is one single substance with all attributes, rather than a plurality of substances each having one infinite attribute. There has to be only one substance, Spinoza argues, because otherwise how do we explain the unity and interaction that we perceive in nature? Interaction and unity would be impossible for a plurality of substances with different attributes. See Curley vol. I page 70, quoted above.

<sup>294</sup> Curley vol. I page 72-3.

*propria*. Spinoza draws an interesting distinction between *propria* and attributes in *Short Treatise*:

The following are called *propria* because they are nothing but adjectives which cannot be understood without their substantives. I.e., without them God would indeed not be God, but still he is not God through them, for they do not make known anything substantial, and it is only through what is substantial that God exists<sup>295</sup>.

This passage, in a footnote, can be interpreted as saying that attributes, including extension, are God's essence, they are constitutive of God's "substantiality," and they are what makes God God. God does not exist as God because, for example, he is cause of all things;<sup>296</sup> on the contrary, he is cause of all things *because* he is infinitely active extension, infinitely active thought, and so on and so forth for an infinite series of infinitely active attributes.

A good definition of God, therefore, must account for the *explanandum* that God is cause of all things. That God is cause of all things we know from 'independent evidence'. The fact that we live in a world of bodies in motion and rest (as in the above quote), the fact that we are thinking things, the accepted philosophical principle that "for everything that exists there must be a cause," the demonstrable fact that God exists (which Spinoza proved in the opening of *Short Treatise*) and is the only substance: all this makes a cogent case for the conclusion that *God causes all things*. But we cannot know the essence of God from the fact that he causes all things;

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<sup>295</sup> Curley vol. I, page 80: fn.a. See discussion of *propria* and attributes in Deleuze.

<sup>296</sup> Being cause of all things is one of God's *propria*: see *Short Treatise*, Ch. III.

on the contrary, the definition of God must make this *proprium* (that God is the cause of everything that exists) follow from it.

In other words, we need to have a definition from which the things we know (from experience) to exist must *follow*: i.e., a definition such that an infinite intellect would derive from it the infinite number of finite things that we experience as existing in infinite ways. So, the idea of God must be such as to be capable to explain all of our experience without labeling it as ‘illusion’, as Parmenides did. Once the true definitions of substance and causation established that God can only immanently cause, and that there cannot be eminent containment, Spinoza can conclude that God’s essence *must* include extension as an attribute, in such a way as to include ‘what is necessary to produce everything that there is to produce.’ Hence, the twist on the traditional notion of essence: God’s essence *is power and activity*, and the attributes are basic ways of God’s activity; they are, *immediately* and *necessarily*, the ways in which God’s power brings about its effects. God is active because he is infinitely real, and reality and activity are one and the same, after Spinoza collapsed the notion of essence as a set of properties, and the notion of powers as accidents, into one. No longer there is an essential *substratum* to powers, as in Suárez. Attributes involve, in a sense that will be clarified in *Ethics*’ use of the term “expression,” activity. We know this because we know that bodies in motion and rest exist, and God’s nature must be such as to be able to produce them.

I think this also shows the reason why Spinoza will later (in *Ethics*) eliminate the language of predication that is still present in *Short Treatise*.<sup>297</sup> As I will discuss in the next

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<sup>297</sup> In this, I disagree with Laurent Bove’s conclusion in *La Stratégie du Conatus*. Bove concludes that Spinoza endorses what he calls “a subversive identification of the synthetic

chapter, the language of expression and manifestation becomes a fundamental part of Spinoza's concept of causation, in order to clarify the nature of God as necessarily, intrinsically *productive*. In *Short Treatise*, the language of "expression" is still absent. This may explain why, in order to convey God's productivity as an element of God's nature, Spinoza 'recycled' the old term "emanative cause" in *Short Treatise*:

We say that God is an *emanative* or *productive* cause of his actions, and, in respect of the action's occurring, an *active* or *efficient* cause. We treat this as one thing, because they involve each other.<sup>298</sup>

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relation cause-effect and of the analytic relation essence-properties." In the next chapter it will become clearer why I reject this conclusion.

<sup>298</sup> Curley, page 80. The division of the efficient cause in eight parts, as quoted by Spinoza, is found in Burgersdijk's *Logic* and, with a variation in order, in Heereboord's *Meletemata*. See Curley's comment to his edition of Spinoza's work, Wolfson (*The Philosophy of Spinoz*), Gueroult (*Spinoza*) and Bove (*La Stratégie du Conatus*). Bove and Gueroult read Heereboord's notion of an emanative cause as "that from which an effect follows immediately (for example, heat from a fire); an active cause, on the contrary, produces the thing through the intermediary of an action. Of the emanative cause, there are two terms which are made one: the cause and the caused-the existence of the cause being identical to its causality" (Bove, page 169-my translation). Like Gueroult before him, Bove fails to take into account Heereboord's conviction that God's causal concurrence is necessary for a causal action to take place, a conviction that problematizes the identity between causality and existence of the cause. For example, the existence of the fire is not identical with its heating action, because if God

The terms “emanation” and “production” are used to refer to God’s *power* to act; the terms “activity” and “efficient causation” with respect to the causal action itself taking place. These were considered distinct metaphysical entities: for example, Suárez argued that a thing’s power to act could not be considered causation proper, because causation proper involves the causal action taking place, and a thing that has causal powers is not always actively causing. For example, a knife has the power to cut even when it is not actively cutting something.<sup>299</sup> Notice that in this passage Spinoza is still holding the distinction (distinction and terminology will disappear in *Ethics*), while asserting that the two involve each other, i.e. that (*contra*, for example, Suárez) there cannot be emanative cause that is not at the same time an efficient cause (i.e. a cause that is not actively producing something). In other words, as we have seen, God’s productivity cannot be ‘held back’.

We know by now that the use of the term “emanation,” by Spinoza or his Dutch predecessors, does not imply an endorsement of the Neoplatonic emanationist model.<sup>300</sup> The

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withholds his concurrence the heating will not take place. See discussion on causal concurrence in the previous chapter.

<sup>299</sup> See Hattab, in Garber (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*.

<sup>300</sup> The strong containment principle endorsed by Spinoza rules out the possibility that he may have accepted emanationism. Emanating an effect out of its cause would pose the problem that the cause would not contain the effect any longer (see the description of various emanationist models in O’Neill’s “Influxus Physicus,” in Nadler (ed.), *Causation in Modern Philosophy*). Spinoza had already argued that this is not possible for God, because it would involve change in what is *per se* unchangeable.

conceptual distinction stated in this passage is between God's power to act in itself and his causal actions. With respect to the latter, God is active and efficient (as opposed to the passivity of the effect). With respect to God's power to act, Spinoza adopted two terms traditionally associated with divine creation, without accepting the 'metaphysical baggage' they came with.

Traditionally, as discussed at length in Lovejoy's work, the principle of plenitude comes with the problem to explain why a perfect and transcendent God would even bother creating something that can never be as perfect as the creator itself. Creation, if anything, brings imperfection into being, not perfection. Authors, from Augustine to Leibniz, defended the principle arguing that variety and diversity are forms of perfection, and that a world where all degrees of imperfection and all kinds of things exist is more perfect than a world where only perfect things existed. Regardless of whether this line of argument makes sense or not, Spinoza did not have this problem: in Spinoza, God does not bring about something from nothingness, but simply manifests his self-determined, necessarily productive essence in infinite modes whose totality, in its infinity, is never really (substantially) other than himself.

## 5.0 CAUSATION IN SPINOZA'S MATURE PHILOSOPHY: *ETHICS*

In this final chapter, I will offer my interpretation of Spinoza's model of causation and show how philosophical elements discussed in the course of my analysis of *Short Treatise* will be fully developed in the discussion of *Ethics*. In particular, I will show how the revision of the concept of essence (conceived as identical with causal power, as opposed to a *substratum* in which causal powers inhere as accidents) is fundamental for the development of Spinoza's model of causation. Ultimately, causation is nothing but a determined output of the essence: a concept for which Spinoza uses the famous term *expression*. The expression model of causation, which, I will argue, is an elaboration of the emanation model, is, for Spinoza, the only model that is consistent with the endorsement of the causal axiom *nihil ex nihilo* and the containment principle, and that allows Spinoza to keep his commitment to univocity (because his model is valid for all instances of causal relationship). Ultimately, both the revision of the concept of essence and the development of the expression model of causation can be seen as deriving from Spinoza's strong endorsement of the causal axiom and principles: this results in a new metaphysics of power where causal relationships are expressions of power. So, the expression model of causation is central to Spinoza's project of constructing a metaphysical system which accounts for the universe we experience, with no room left for that transcendent God which, we have seen, created so many problems for Spinoza's predecessors.



In this discussion, I will also introduce an important consequence of Spinoza's revision of traditional ontology: Spinoza's rejection of the notion of absolute individuation. In rejecting the idea that modes can be individuated absolutely, i.e. independently of other modes, Spinoza rejects the idea that individual "things," or modes, are anything above and beyond their causal activity, and therefore their causal relationship to other modes. In other words, there is no absolute way in Spinoza to individuate "this" mode, except by referring to the other modes it is related to. As we have seen, Descartes does not offer a satisfactory account of individuation: while he talks as if there were really distinct bodies, his account of individuation is circular. In a later section, I will explain why Spinoza does not have the problem of circularity; however, because of the limitations of language, he still sometimes talks as if modes were some entities distinct from each other and individuated by some basic features prior to their being causes. This can be misleading. Modes are not individual things. They are activities, or, in today's terms (a term that I will not use during this discussion), *processes*.

Discussion of "causation as expression" abound in Spinoza scholarship, especially since Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. For lack of space, I will not discuss Deleuze's interpretation in detail, though I will discuss a few specific points. To anticipate a bit, Deleuze sees the concept of expression as a primitive in Spinoza philosophy. Focusing on expression as *manifestation*,<sup>301</sup> Deleuze sees it as more basic than causation: causation is a form of expression,

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<sup>301</sup> Deleuze names, as possible sources for Spinoza's concept of expression, philosophers that discuss the world as *manifestation* (Scotus Erigena, Augustine) or *explication* (Nicholas of Cusa) of God's essence. In my opinion, the resemblances between Spinoza and these authors are superficial rather than substantial. More on this later.

but not all expression is causation. I will show that this interpretation fails to account for aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics such as the role and nature of the attributes.

As others have pointed out (Giancotti, Deleuze, Gueroult),<sup>302</sup> "*expressio*" in Spinoza is a technical term. I will show that, in its technical use, it is *symmetrical* with causation, in the sense that to cause is *to be expressed* (in one's effects), and to be caused is *to express* (one's cause). The reason for using the term "expression" must be found, in my opinion, in the fact that Spinoza wanted to preserve a specific feature of the emanationist model (the "necessary outpouring" aspect) without endorsing the model itself. "Expression", never before used in this sense, allowed him to do just that.

In this chapter I will first explain why I believe Spinoza was committed to methodological univocity. I will then discuss Spinoza's concept of essence as power, and its relation to the notion of *causa sui*, and then explain the features of Spinoza's containment/expression model of causation. I will then discuss modal, or "horizontal" causation, and introduce a "physics of expression." My conclusion will give a non exhaustive summary of the advantages of my interpretation over alternative interpretations, and some remarks on Spinoza's metaphysical project.

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<sup>302</sup> See Martial Gueroult's *Spinoza* and Emilia Giancotti's excellent commentary to her Italian edition of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

## 5.1 SPINOZA'S METHODOLOGICAL UNIVOCITY

In the beginning of this work, I claimed that Spinoza was committed to rejecting the equivocal use of fundamental metaphysical terms such as “substance” (*substantia*) and “cause” (*causa*). We already saw this methodological univocity at work in *Short Treatise*: the concept of a substance other than God is explicitly rejected (what is not ontologically independent is simply not substance), and the concept of causation is being revised in a way that precludes some of *Ethics*' core positions: in particular that God is *causa sui* in the same sense in which he is cause of everything else, and that the causation of finite modes is the causation of God as well. *Short Treatise* sketched that revision of the concept of essence that will be the basis for the principle of plenitude: the concept of essence as one with power, with no degrees of separation. Such a concept of essence, in God, must be such as to allow us to infer from it everything that we know follows from it: for Spinoza, only a concept of essence as activity will do.

In *Ethics*, as we will see, Spinoza starts with a definition of substance from which he consistently concludes that there cannot be such a thing as a *created* substance. Rather than accepting that the concept of substance applies differently to God and created things, Spinoza enforces his “methodological univocity” by simply refusing to apply the label “substance” to anything whose nature is not described by his univocal definition. Discussions of Spinoza's commitment to the univocity of “substance” are quite straightforward, because of his explicitly univocal definition in *Ethics* I.

The same univocity, as I will now show, works for causation. Spinoza accepted the causal axioms, and elaborates them in a model that is supposed to account for all causal relations. This discussion will need more elaboration, because Spinoza never defines the term *causa* in *Ethics*.

There seem to be at least two good reasons why Spinoza would endorse the principle of univocity. The most compelling is Spinoza's commitment to the modern version of Ockham's razor: a 'skinnier' metaphysics, unencumbered by what 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers liked to label as the Scholastic-Aristotelian 'junk terminology,' or the unnecessary multiplication of metaphysical entities (regardless of how accurate the label may be). A commitment to eliminate unnecessary entities and terms from metaphysics could be easily translated into a commitment to eliminate equivocation.

The second reason why Spinoza would be committed to the principle of univocity lies in his rejection of transcendence. The rationale between Descartes' equivocal use of the terms "causation" and "substance," we have seen, lies in the incommensurability and transcendence of God. For Spinoza, there is no such rationale. So, both his rejection of transcendence and his commitment to a cleaner, 'skinnier' metaphysics reinforced each other and led to the principle of univocity.<sup>303</sup>

While there are no clear-cut statements of univocity in Spinoza, his discussion of substance makes it clear that "anyone who understands the real meaning of substance"<sup>304</sup> would have to agree that there can be only *one* substance. This requires that "substance" can be said only univocally. Whatever does not meet the requirement of ontological and causal independence is not 'a different kind of substance'. It is simply *not* a substance. As for the notion of "being" (*esse*), it is dubious that for Spinoza there could a transcendent notion of being, a

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<sup>303</sup> In a later section I will discuss an apparent problem for this interpretation, the Sch. to EI P17.

<sup>304</sup> *Ethics* I, P8 Sch. 2.

*summum genus* above and beyond substance and mode, which would apply to substance primarily and then, by analogy, to modes, as Di Vona claimed in his 1960 work *Studi sull'ontologia di Spinoza*. I will briefly anticipate what will be discussed extensively in the following sections: Spinoza equates being with power (*potentia*) and actual essence (*essentia*, or *actuosa essentia*: an early statement of the equivalence can be found in *Ethics* I P 11 Sch), and, as we will see, there is no genus “power” above and beyond the power of a substance and the power of a mode (which are ultimately the same). Power, and therefore being, are said univocally, and the distinction between a substance and a mode lies in ‘quantity’ (finite vs. infinite, or conditioned vs. unconditioned<sup>305</sup>), rather than the source and nature, of this power.

Because of the identity relation between power and essence, the discussion of causation brings us to the same conclusion about univocity. Because of his understanding of essences as causal power, Spinoza constructs a model that applies univocally to God and finite modes. The univocity of causation is related to the univocity of being, power and substance. It is because there are different senses of being and substance that Descartes needed different senses of causation. In Spinoza, God and mode are causes according to the same sense of “cause” because of their relation of immanence: every causal activity *is* God’s causal activity. In a later section, I will discuss to what extent Spinoza’s project can be considered successful.

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<sup>305</sup> The two are the same, since for Spinoza the infinite is necessarily unconditioned (or better yet self-determined), while the finite is necessarily conditioned.

## 5.2 CONCRETE CAUSATION: A PRELIMINARY NOTE AGAINST THE INFERENTIAL INTERPRETATION OF CAUSATION

Spinoza, we have repeatedly seen, considered the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom as binding. Even God is not uncaused, but rather *causa sui*. God is self-explanatory and self-caused, not unexplained and uncaused. This is the most extreme version of the containment and the similarity principles: in God, the cause is *identical* with its effect.

While several interpreters (most importantly Curley and Bennett) reduced Spinoza's metaphysics of causation to logical relationships between propositions (the so-called inferential view of causation), it has been effectively argued that this view does not account for important aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics. Mason suggests<sup>306</sup> that we actually should reverse the path, and interpret Spinoza's talk of necessity in demonstrations as derivative of his causation metaphysics.

I agree with Mason. In Spinoza's view of demonstration, the necessity of demonstrations is *derivative* of the necessity in the world. While the necessity in demonstration is mediated by the sometimes unreliable tool of language, it is quite obvious that Spinoza is interested in

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<sup>306</sup> Mason, "Concrete Logic" (in Koistinen and Biro, *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes*). His interpretation centers on Spinoza's definition of necessity as about things, not sentences: "It is a thing-*res* again- that is necessary, not a sentence, statement or proposition. And a necessary thing is a thing determined to exist and act by another thing... The necessity in the existence and action of things does not consist in the truth of assertions about them, but simply in their having causes (not the fact that they have causes)." Mason, "Concrete Logic," page 76.

representing linguistically the necessity of things in the world, rather than in establishing necessary relations between statements:

A thing is called necessary either by reason of its essence, or by reason of its cause. For a thing's existence follows necessarily either from its *essence and definition*,<sup>307</sup> or from a *given efficient cause*. And a thing is also called impossible from these same cause-viz. either because its essence, or definition, involves a contradiction, or because there is no external cause which has been determined to produce such a thing.<sup>308</sup>

So, something is necessary with respect to its efficient cause: either as self-caused (necessary because of its essence or definition), or as caused by something external. The concept of efficient cause does not belong to logic, but to metaphysics. Notice that the definition of necessity entails the equivalence of freedom and self-determination (thus ruling out the undetermined):

That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is said to be necessary, or

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<sup>307</sup> For the relation between definition and essence, see letter 4 to Oldenburg (page 67) and letter 9 to De Vries, page 91. The equivalence stands as long as the definition is true, or *describes an essence*. So, essences are prior to definitions, and the necessity of what follows from definitions is derivative of the causal necessity of essences themselves.

<sup>308</sup> EI, P33, Sch. 1; page 436.

rather constrained, if it is determined by another thing to exist and to act in a certain and determinate way.<sup>309</sup>

From all this, and other passages, it is obvious that it is the necessity of *causation* that grounds logical necessity. Demonstrations acquire their necessity from their being *representations of actual causal relationships* between essences and “things” (more on this later).

Supporters of the interpretation that ascribes Spinoza an inferential model of causation stress Spinoza’s choice of the deductive geometrical order. I believe that this choice has a different explanation. Spinoza’s language of causation is replete with terms that evoke the language of deduction, in particular syllogism: this much is true. Deduction is non-ampliative: nothing can be found in the conclusion that was not *contained* in the premises. Because of Spinoza’s endorsement of the causal containment principle, the language of deduction is especially appropriate when speaking of the derivation, the “following” of things from God. There are passages in *Ethics* where Spinoza treats “following” (*sequi*) and “being in” (*in ... esse*) or “being contained in” (*in ... contineri*) as involving each other. For example:

We conceive of things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them *to be contained in* God, and to *follow from* the necessity of the divine nature.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> EI D7; vol. I page 407.

<sup>310</sup> *Ethics* V, P29 Sch.; Curley page 610.



Spinoza's frequent use of the term "follow" to indicate a causal relationship is not explained by his reducing causal relations to logical relations, but rather by his endorsing the strong version of the containment principle, and by his revision of the concept of essence. For Spinoza, the essence (as we will see in more details soon) contains its effects *qua* the power to bring them about. In this sense, effects follow from the essence (or nature). Because of the unique use of the containment principle, and of the new concept of essence, Spinoza needed a new term to convey this form of relationship: this new term is "expression." The previous analysis showed that Spinoza endorsed a *strong* version of the containment principle, rejecting eminent containment and any form of causation where the effect is *really* (as opposed to modally) distinct from the cause, is a different substance from the cause.

All these statements are about the reality of "things," about how "things" are and relate to each other (I will soon discuss the ontological status of what is ambiguously called "thing"). Causal necessity is grounded in the containment principle and in the notion of essences as powers; the necessity of demonstration is grounded in their being accurate linguistic representation of things and their relationship, not in what Bennett calls a confusion between causal and logical necessity. In fact, the necessity linking one idea to the next is causal necessity, not logical necessity. The latter in Spinoza is only derivative, as Mason well argued.

### **5.3 THE REVOLUTION OF ESSENCE:**

#### **EXPRESSION, THE ATTRIBUTES AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PLENITUDE**

The previous chapter has shown Spinoza's commitment to the principle of plenitude in *Short Treatise*. Such principle, I argued, is based on a revision of the concept of essence which is never

systematically discussed in *Short Treatise*, but is obviously assumed: the equivalence of essence with causal power.

EI P 16 is the first statement of the principle of plenitude. Its demonstration shows that the principle of plenitude is explained by God's essence:

P16 Dem: This proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e., from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, i.e. *the more reality the definition of the defined thing involves*. But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes... each of which *also expresses in its own kind an infinite essence*, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes...<sup>311</sup>

Spinoza has not yet explicitly equated essence with power, except briefly in the Sch. To P 11. However, we can see that here a major conceptual shift has occurred, whose seeds, I claimed, can be found in Suárez's and Herrera's problematic treatment of the relationship between the essence of God and his causal activity.

Traditionally, the Aristotelians and Scholastics posited a distinction between the actual essence and its activities (roughly, the distinction between potentiality and actuality). The actuality is the perfection of something's essence, something above and beyond the "existing"

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<sup>311</sup> Curley 425. I modified Curley's translation for reasons that I will explain soon.

Curley's translation says "But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes... each of which *also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind*." Notice that the "necessity" of the divine nature is its power, as will become clear in EI P34.

and the “being a man.” For example, for Aristotle the perfection of the man in actuality is doing philosophy. Men can exist without doing philosophy, but it is only when they philosophize that they are fully actualized men. However, Aristotle himself eliminated the distinction in God, who is pure act: God is always pure thought. In a being who is pure act, there is no state of potentiality, meaning that the being is always in that form of activity that constitutes its perfection.

However, Aristotle did not have the problem to explain the discrepancy between God, pure unchanging act, and a world of change and potentiality, *because in Aristotle God does not create the world*: the world and God both exist from eternity. Christian and Jewish philosophers must explain the origin of potentiality and imperfection. In Suárez and Herrera, as we have seen, the containment principle and the relationship between God’s essence and its “emanation” (a term that Scholastics used referring to the activity of creation) were problematized by the gap created by free will. In order to preserve free will (especially, but not exclusively, God’s free will) and the dependence of everything from God, it was necessary to create a distance between an essence and its causal ‘output.’ It was considered blasphemy to say that God creates *necessarily*, as opposed to voluntarily. It was considered unacceptable as well to claim that a created thing’s essence can have existence and causal powers (its activities) independently of God’s continuing action of conservation and causal concurrence. While God is pure act, things (without God) are pure potency, or mere possibles, until God creates them (and after creation they would revert to this state of unactualized existence if not for God’s continuing assistance).

So, an ontological gap was posited between the essence of a created thing, its actual existence and the powers that make it causally active. What about God? In God’s case the problem is to preserve the essence of God as pure activity (and as infinite power), while at the

same time making creation contingent. In Herrera, God (Ein Sof) created by emanation the *sefirot*, so that he can be separated from the rest of the creation; and yet, the *sefirot*'s causation is God's causation, because the *sefirot* are not separated creatures, but in a sense they are God's *activities*. In the Scholastic tradition, because of God's simplicity, power *is* God's essence; yet, the gap between God's causal power and God's causal action is even wider, because of the introduction of divine will. We have seen how Suárez struggled with this problem, and how he comes close to ascribing a sort of necessity to God's creation as well as to his concurrence.

In Spinoza, God's essence, whose expressions are the infinite and finite modes in the infinite attributes, is explicitly equated with power only in *Ethics* I, P 34. Once again, let me stress how important this conceptual shift is. "Power" (*potentia*) is no longer ambiguously related to both the notion of power and the Aristotelian-Scholastic notion of *potentiality*, but becomes *univocally* actuality/activity, in an important terminological shift. In the Scholastic tradition, *potentia* in God meant exclusively "power," but when it came to created things the *potentia* involved in their essence was related to their being potentially existing and potentially active: only with God's cooperation the potentiality became actual. But in Spinoza the distinction disappears: in God as well as in the modes, essence is *potentia* qua power, never *potentia* qua potentiality. This is important: if the essence of something is equated with its causal power, then effects will follow *necessarily* from the essence. But notice that in E II P 11 Dem 3 and Sch., God's "power" (*potentia*) includes existence (*existentia*). If nonexistence is lack of power, then what is pure power in its essence is also necessarily existing by its essence.

Spinoza eliminates any degree of separation: essence and power, including existence,<sup>312</sup> are one and the same, which explains why effects necessarily follow from the essence as its expressions (as we will see), like, as it were, developments or extensions. Of course, it is only in a monistic metaphysics, where causes and effects are only *modally* distinct and never fully individuals in a substantial sense, that this concept of causation can make sense. It is this conceptual shift, as we will see, that allows Spinoza the full endorsement of the principle of plenitude. Having the power of bringing about an effect means *being* the power to bring about that effect, means *containing the effect in one's essence*; but it also means that the effects take place *necessarily* given the cause, and that therefore, provided there is no *causa impediens*, everything will bring about whatever is in its power to bring about. Moreover, there is nothing to being an essence besides being a cause. When an essence is overwhelmed by external things, a thing ceases to be.<sup>313</sup> It dissolves, it becomes, as it were, absorbed into the essences that are acting on it.

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<sup>312</sup> Existence is involved in essence insofar as the thing has essence, or power. In the case of created things, existence depends on an external cause.

<sup>313</sup> “That a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing” (E IV, P 20 Sch.; Curley, 557). Because essences cannot contain in themselves anything that hinders their activity, any such element must come from outside, and is therefore an indication of passivity. So, Spinoza argues, no one will consider hanging himself, unless he is overwhelmed by passions.

All this is valid for every *actual* essence (i.e., essence of something actually existing).<sup>314</sup>

Let us now look specifically into the essence of God. Spinoza discusses the essence of God in terms of his attributes. Attributes are introduced in a notoriously obscure definition:

D4; By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance,  
as *constituting* its essence.<sup>315</sup>

In a subsequent definition, Spinoza adds that attributes “express” God’s eternal and infinite essence (D6). Deleuze, in his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, argues that this shows that, for Spinoza, there are *two* levels of expression: the essence of God is expressed in attributes, which, in turn, are expressed in modes.

...Spinoza says that each attribute expresses a *certain* infinite and eternal  
*essence*, an essence corresponding to that particular kind of attribute. Or: each

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<sup>314</sup> Actual essence is not opposed to potential essence, which is a concept Spinoza rejects. Essences are in the infinite modes as those who follow immediately from an attribute. For example, motion and rest and all their patterns are essences within the immediate infinite mode of extension. Actual essences are instances of patterns of motion and rest, or finite modes within the infinite mediate mode of extension, that are brought into existence by other finite modes. More on this in a later section.

<sup>315</sup> Curley vol. I p. 408. I agree with Curley’s and Gueroult’s reading: the ‘intellect’ referred to here is not simply a finite, human intellect, but the infinite intellect of God. This makes the subjectivist interpretation implausible: how could God’s intellect possibly perceive the substance differently from what it really is? If God’s intellect perceives the substance’s essence as “constituted” in attributes, then this is what God’s essence is like.

attribute expresses the *essence* of substance, its being or reality. Or again: each attribute expresses the infinity and necessity of substantial existence, that is expresses eternity...

Modes are, in turn, expressive...So *we must identify a second level of expression*: an expression, as it were, of expression itself. Substance first expresses itself in its attributes, *each attribute expressing an essence*. But then attributes express themselves in turn: they express themselves in their subordinate modes, each such mode expressing a modification of the attribute...expression as production is grounded in a prior expression.<sup>316</sup>

I believe that this interpretation is problematic in several ways, the most important being Deleuze's conviction (which he does not support, insisting that the term "expression" is undefinable) that, for Spinoza, expression is a more basic concept than causation.

As evident already from his Introduction, Deleuze conflates the semantic use of "expression" with the metaphysical one, which does not appear until later in Spinoza's career. Deleuze states that, for Spinoza, individual ideas express the idea of God "as their cause" (*Ethics* II, P 45-47). Then, Deleuze moves on to claim that

Ideas, in turn, express the essence, nature or perfection of their objects: a thing's definition, or idea, is said to express the thing's nature as it is in itself.

However, the quote that Deleuze uses to support this claim is taken from *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the early, incomplete work that Spinoza wrote before he developed his notion of causation as expression. Spinoza does not introduce "expression" in its technical sense before *Ethics*. In his previous works, he uses "expression" exclusively in the semantic

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<sup>316</sup> Deleuze, pages 13-14.

sense.<sup>317</sup> Definitions “express” the way any other term does; ideas “express” their objects in the sense that they are accurate, reliable *representations* of them. In *Ethics*, however, Spinoza does not tell us that definitions, or ideas, “express” their *objectum*. The reason is simple: the relationship of expression does not exist between ideas (and their linguistic correspondent) and their *ideata*. This is because the relationship of expression is tied to the relationship of causation, and Spinoza rejected the notion of idea-*ideatum* causation. If *ideata* are not caused by ideas, they do not express them.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> In Spinoza’s correspondence, “expression” appears in the sense it has in *Ethics* for the first time in a 1675 letter to Schuller (letter 64).

<sup>318</sup> It is true that, as I pointed out elsewhere, Spinoza uses *exprimere* or *exprimi* in a semantic sense in *Ethics* occasionally, i.e. refers to linguistic expressions (definitions) that “express” the nature of what they refer to (a triangle, or God). However, it is necessary to point out that in these passages Spinoza uses a different term: he uses *exprimere* coupled with *involvere*. For example, see EI P 16, E II, P 29, or E III P 27. Given that there is only a finite set of, well, linguistic *expressions* that, well, *express* the meaning he needed to *express*, it was hardly avoidable. In the comment to her Italian edition of *Ethics*, Emilia Giancotti points out a similar situation regarding Spinoza’s equivocal use of the term *explicare*, used sometimes as a synonym for *exprimere* (to express), and sometimes meaning “to explain.” Giancotti tries to overcome the problem by translating *explicare* and *explicatio*, depending on context, with either *esplicare/esplicazione* (explicate/explication) or with *spiegare/spiegazione* (explain/explanation). She even points to an example in which the Dutch translation in *Nagelate Schriften* clarifies the equivocal expression in the Latin version: in E I P 14, the Latin *explicari debet* is rendered in



This confusion is problematic, because (in my opinion) it prevents Deleuze from seeing the relationship between *expression* and *causation*. Deleuze's discussion of attributes as "Divine names," as expressions/manifestations of the divine essence, concludes that each attribute/manifestation has, as such, *its own essence*: Deleuze's language in the passage quoted above speaks of each attribute expressing "a *certain* essence" of God. However, we do not find such a position in *Ethics*: it is obvious that at that time for Spinoza each attribute expresses in its way one and only one essence, the essence of God. In early letters to Henry Oldenburg and Simon de Vries, Spinoza indeed explains attributes in reference to the intellect ascribing the substance "a certain kind of nature."<sup>319</sup> However, the language disappears from later letters and from *Ethics*.<sup>320</sup> This seems to me a good reason to think that Spinoza changed his mind, or that

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Dutch with *verklart en uitgedrukt worden* ("is explicated *and* expressed"). It is also important to admit that, while Spinoza's terminology in *Ethics* is much more consistent and rigorous than in his previous works, there are instances in which he slips and uses a term in a different sense than the technical. For example, in Sch. II to E II P 40 he uses *attributum* in the sense of "property," rather than in his usual technical sense. The context makes it perfectly clear that he is not talking of attributes as "that which expresses and constitutes the essence of a substance": in fact, he is not talking about substances at all.

<sup>319</sup> Letter 4 to Oldenburg and letter 9 to De Vries.

<sup>320</sup> There are passages in his translation of *Ethics* where, by adding the indeterminate article "a" where none exists in the Latin version, Curley makes Spinoza say that in fact each attribute expresses *an essence* (as opposed to the only essence). I have pointed out this discrepancy where it occurs.

he clarified his language. There is no clear way to decide between these two options, but the fact that the language in *Ethics* is very different shows at the very least that, if Spinoza held such position earlier, he did not hold it any longer by the time he finished working on *Ethics*.

Deleuze defends two levels of expression: attributes, each in its own essence, express God; then, modes, each in its own essence, express attributes. For example, Deleuze writes:

God expresses himself in the foundation of the world, which forms his essence, *before* expressing himself in the world.<sup>321</sup>

This language is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, Spinoza, in EI P4 Dem, tells us that “there is nothing but substance and its affections.” If Deleuze is right that the attributes constitute intermediate layers of expression between substance and mode, each of which having *its own essence* (as distinct from the essence of a substance),<sup>322</sup> then Spinoza’s ontology should include an additional layer: substance, its expressions (attributes) and the expressions of such expressions (modes). Spinoza, on the other hand, very clearly states that there exist only substance and its affections: attributes are *not* affections of the substance. The affections of the

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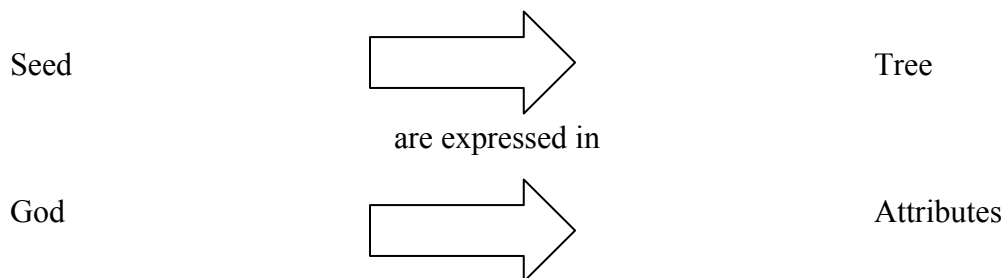
<sup>321</sup> Deleuze, p. 80.

<sup>322</sup> See, in particular, Deleuze ch. 3: “They have irreducible formal reasons; each attribute expresses, as its formal reason, or quiddity, *an infinite essence*... each attributes *its essence* to substance *as to something else*.” This passage, like much of Deleuze’s discussion, is quite confusing, and does not quite refer to any of Spinoza’s texts. This is for the excellent reason that Spinoza does not discuss attributes in terms of having formal reasons, or *quidditates*, or essence. Attributes do not have their own individual essence.

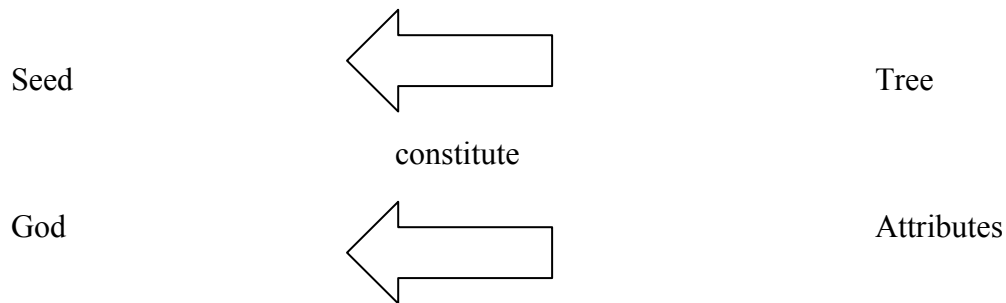
substance are the modes: “affection” is “what is and is conceived in something else,” thus ruling out the attributes. Thus, attributes are nothing but God’s essence itself.

The other problem concerns the relationship between the attributes and the essence that they express/constitute. Deleuze insists that “expression” is rendered not simply by the concept of “manifestation/mirroring,” but by the “seminal” relationship between a seed and what grows from it. In other words, expression is to what is expressed as a tree is to its seed; or, the expressed thing constitutes, grows into, its expressions. But the essence of God, which is expressed in the attributes, is also constituted by them. The problem with the seed metaphor is this: if God’s essence is *expressed* and *constituted* by the attributes of God, what exactly is expressed in the attributes prior to their constituting the essence that they express? If the essence is constituted by the attributes that are its expressions, the attributes would have to be at the same time ontologically prior and posterior to the essence.

The seed/tree metaphor illustrates the relationship of expression in an unidirectional way:



However, Deleuze wants us to think that somehow the metaphore works as well in the opposite direction:



The problem with the second scheme is immediately evident. If attributes are considered as the *products* of the self-expressing activity of God, then one cannot consider them as *constituents* of the very same self-expressing activity.

Deleuze's discussion of what exactly the relationship of expression *is* is not straightforward. Oversimplifying, he wants it to be a relationship of manifestation/production, which is, strictly speaking, neither. It is unclear if, and in what sense of "expression," the expression of God in his attributes, and of the attributes in the modes, are the same kind of process or not. Modes are clearly caused/produced. Deleuze, understandably, does not want to straightforwardly say that *attributes* are produced, but he insists on a more or less metaphoric language of causality and production (as in the seed metaphore). This lack of clarity in the discussion itself makes it hard to offer a detailed criticism, but I hope I have shown why his discussion of two levels of expression is full of problems and does not offer any real advantage. We do not need to consider attributes as the *products* of an activity of "expression," whatever this may be.

The best way to think about attributes is as basic, irreducible *ways*, or channels of God's activity, or power (which, as we will see in the next section, is the same as God's *existing*):

“express-ings,” rather than expressions. In other words, rather than *products* of God’s activity of expression (as in Deleuze’s reading), somewhat following from some mysterious essence that is ontologically more basic, attributes are the ways in which this *activity* of causing, or expressing, which is the essence itself, occurs. Attributes are constitutive of God’s existence and power, because existence and power only are in these “express-ings,” in these basic *ways of activity*; or, the power of God is constituted through these ways of activity.<sup>323</sup> In other words, God’s essence is one and the same power which exists *as* power of thinking, *as* power of producing, and as innumerable other ways of causing that are not accessible to the human mind. The fact that attributes are constitutive of God’s essence does not entail that they are *parts* (Spinoza denies that a substance has parts, though sometimes he adopts the language of parts metaphorically): because the power is one, each attribute expresses the power totally, *in its infinity*. This is why, though humans have epistemic access to only two of God’s infinite attributes, we still can have an adequate idea of the essence of God.

My interpretation goes against Gueroult’s reading, in his 1968 *Spinoza* vol. I: *Dieu*, which considers “attribute” identical with “substance.” For Gueroult, the fact that Spinoza defines both attribute and substance as “that which exists in itself and is conceived in itself” is evidence of the ontological equivalence of the two.<sup>324</sup> Gueroult is right when he says that the

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<sup>323</sup> This is a revision of Bennett’s reading of attributes as basic ways of being in his *A Study of Spinoza’s “Ethics.”* Because, arguably, one cannot cause unless existing, attributes are basic ways of existing as well. More on this in a later section.

<sup>324</sup> “Thus, the attribute is nothing but a substance in flesh and blood, revealed in that which constitutes its proper nature. This is because substance and attributes are

substance is nothing above and beyond the attributes. However, his conclusion that the divine substance is constituted of an infinite number of these substances-attributes is unwarranted. Gueroult supports this conclusion with the claim that each attribute expresses *an essence infinite in its own kind* (the essence of the substance-attribute), but *not* the absolutely infinite essence of the divine substance (Ch. I). The relationship between this absolutely infinite essence of the divine substance, and the essence of each attribute is extremely unclear. As I already stated, Spinoza never speaks of the essence *of an attribute*: only modes and the substance have essence, because there is nothing in nature but *substantia* (singular) and its modes.

Gueroult's interpretation has several problems, one of which being the lack of textual support. In Sch. to EI P10, Spinoza explicitly denies that, because attributes are conceptually independent, they must belong to different *substances*, which is a necessary assumption of Gueroult's thesis, since he states that *each attribute is a substance*. Another problem with Gueroult's interpretation is that it problematizes the possibility of us having an adequate idea of the essence of God. If the attributes are the only epistemic access we have to God's absolutely infinite essence (which they are),<sup>325</sup> and if God's essence is "constituted" by the attributes, but is not expressed *entirely* in each of them, then it is unclear how we can have an adequate idea of

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interchangeable... from which one sees that there is nothing but a distinction of reason between substance and attribute" (vol. I, p. 47-8; my translation).

<sup>325</sup> This is clear from the very beginning of *Ethics*, where Spinoza defines attribute as "what the intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence" ("*id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens*"). This is not to say that the essence of substance in itself is unknowable. More on this later.

God's infinite essence (which we have: see E II P47).<sup>326</sup> On the other hand, if (as I claim) each attribute expresses the infinite essence of God, then once we have an adequate idea of an attribute (which we can, as Spinoza states in E II P38: it is involved in the idea of any existing thing), we have an adequate idea of the infinite essence of God (E II P 47).

Moreover, if one argues that substances and attributes are equivalent (as Gueroult does), then one must conclude that each of these substance-attributes is its own cause (because of EI,

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<sup>326</sup> "The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God's infinite and eternal essence." Curley I, 482. The demonstration is based on E I P 45: "Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which is actually existing, necessarily involves *an* eternal and infinite essence of God" (Curley p. 418. Notice, again, that Curley inserts the article "an" following Gueroult, but no corresponding expression exists in the Latin text ("*Unaquaeque cujuscunque corporis, vel rei singularis actu existentis, idea Dei aeternam et infinitam essentiam necessario involvit,*" which can more plausibly be translated "Each idea of each body, or of a singular thing existing in act, involves necessarily *the* eternal and infinite essence of God"). Gueroult tries to solve this problem by arguing that, insofar as the adequate idea of God is in the human mind, the other infinite attributes are necessarily "obfuscated" (p. 53-4). He quotes as evidence a passage from a footnote to *Short Treatise* Ch. I (Curley, vol. I p. 63-4), where Spinoza cryptically states that "the attributes themselves" tell us *that* they are without telling us *what* they are. The passage indeed denies that we have an idea of the infinite other attributes from the two we know, and has no parallel in *Ethics*, where (as we have seen) a more accurate translation shows that for Spinoza individual things involve an idea of the essence of God absolutely, not of *an* essence of God.

P6 and 7).<sup>327</sup> So, extension and thought would be the cause of themselves, and therefore they would necessarily exist. But notice that in *Short Treatise* Spinoza's argument against Cartesian substance dualism was based on the claim that neither extension nor thought can exist in themselves unless conceived as *attributes* of God *rather than substances*: a position that Spinoza held all his life (see, for example, his 1675 letter to Tschirnhaus).<sup>328</sup> Given all these problems, I consider Gueroult's interpretation untenable.

To sum up: Spinoza conceived the essence of God as infinite activity which is expressed in infinite modes (or affections). This expression occurs in infinite ways, or channels of causing: the attributes, or express-*ings*. These are constitutive of God's essence in the sense that, while the power of God is one and is expressed in infinite ways, it is nothing above and beyond its activity of expressing (the attributes). God is pure activity; therefore, nothing *in* God can prevent him from creating everything that he can create. On the other hand, nothing *outside* of God exists, that can interfere with God's activity and prevent whatever is possible from becoming real. Hence, the principle of plenitude is true.<sup>329</sup> This will be important later on.

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<sup>327</sup> P6 states that a substance cannot be caused by anything else; P7 states that it pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.

<sup>328</sup> Ep. 82.

<sup>329</sup> We have seen that, in *Short Treatise*, the endorsement of the principle of plenitude was based on the fact that we know that a reality of bodies in motion, and their representations, exist, and therefore God's essence must be such as to explain this reality. In *Ethics*, consistently with the order of things, the proof of the principle of plenitude is based on God's essence, and nothing else.



The revision of the concept of essence, as I will discuss in a later section, is also important for an understanding of the causal activity of the finite modes. However, two important things remain to be discussed regarding the role of essence in Spinoza's model of causation: the conflation of the Aristotelian concept of formal cause with efficient cause, and the priority of the concept of *causa sui*.

The equivalence between essence and activity, or causal power, has brought Carraud, in his 2002 *Causa sive Ratio*, to claim that, in Spinoza, *all* cause is formal cause. This is a distortion, though Carraud has a point. Spinoza's language is the language of someone who considers *efficient* cause as the only philosophically interesting concept of causation,<sup>330</sup> as we will see. However, it is true that in his concept of efficient causation Spinoza includes elements that belonged to the Aristotelian-Scholastic concept of formal cause.

The formal cause (traditionally) is the reason why something is what it is; for example, what makes a statue a statue, or, oversimplifying, its *essence*. The efficient cause, on the other hand, is what accounts for coming to be, existence and becoming. In Spinoza, only one concept of cause answers both questions. Because essence is the power to cause, the formal cause of something involves its efficient cause, or (in Spinoza's terms) we have an adequate knowledge of something's essence (in Aristotelian terms, its formal cause) only when we have an adequate knowledge of its efficient cause. On the other hand, in Spinoza efficient causation involves formal causation in the sense that what something *does* and what something *is* are one and the same. Spinoza's choice to privilege the notion of the efficient cause (reflected by his terminology) over the notion of the formal cause can be only partly explained by his following

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<sup>330</sup> *Lexicon Spinozanum* reports only one instance of the expression *causa formalis* in the whole of *Ethics* (E V, P31 and Dem.), vs. the several instances of *causa efficiens*.

Descartes and the model of the mechanical philosophy. We will see in the next section that the concept of formal cause has a role in Descartes' elaboration of the notion of *causa sui*; Spinoza will not follow Descartes on this. More importantly, for Spinoza, causation was a more basic concept than essence: this is evident from the fact that essence itself is defined in terms of causal powers, and not the other way around.

#### 5.4 SUBSTANCE AND ITS CAUSE: METAPHYSICS OF POWER

Spinoza's revised concept of essence has an important role in his development of the notion of *causa sui*, which was obviously inspired by Descartes's discussion (for example, in his replies to Aruand's objections to *Meditations*). The definition of *causa sui* opens *Ethics*:

D1: By *cause of itself* I understand that whose essence involves existence,  
or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.<sup>331</sup>

What does it mean for something's essence to involve existence *in a causal sense*? The answer is clear when we think about the above discussion of essence: something that is *causa sui* is a being of such power as to make its existence necessary, exactly because of its power. The power of God is the *causa sive ratio* of his existence, or it *explains and causally involves* his existence. In adopting the notion of *causa sui*, Spinoza followed Descartes, who argued that it is possible to establish a positive notion of *causa sui* based on the infinite power of God. For example, in his response to Caterus' First Set of Objections, Descartes wrote:

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<sup>331</sup> Curley vol. 1 page 408.

Similarly, when we say that God derived his existence ‘from himself’, we can understand the phrase in the negative sense, in which case the meaning is that *he has no cause*. But if we have previously inquired into the cause of God’s existing, or continuing to exist, and we attend to the *immense and incomprehensible power that is contained within the idea of God*, then we will have recognized that this power is so exceedingly great that it is plainly the cause of his continuing existence, and nothing but this can be the cause. And if we say as a result that *God derives his existence from himself*, we will not be using the phrase in his negative sense, *but in an absolutely positive sense*.<sup>332</sup>

The issue is more articulated in Descartes’ responses to the sharp questions of the theologian Antoine Arnauld. Arnauld accused Descartes of endorsing a “false and absurd” doctrine, i.e. the idea that God is his own *efficient* cause. In his response, Descartes admitted that, in the commonly accepted sense of efficient cause, the idea is absurd. However, while God is not his own efficient cause, he can be thought “in a certain sense” to “stand to himself in the same way as an efficient cause does to its effects.” In other words, God is not really his own efficient cause, but *must be thought as his own efficient cause for lack of a better way to understand this unique form of causality*. In this sense, one must think of God’s self-causation as something positive, because the idea is based on the quintessentially positive concept of God’s power:

Right at the beginning, having said ‘if anything exists we may always inquire into its efficient cause,’ I immediately went on ‘or, if it does not have one, we may demand why it does not need one.’ These words make it quite clear that I

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<sup>332</sup> CSM II 79-80. Strangely enough, Carraud’s otherwise illuminating work fails to notice this remarkable similarity.

did believe in the existence of something that *does not need an efficient cause*. And what could that be but God? A little later on, I said that ‘there is in God such a great and inexhaustible power that he never required the assistance of anything in order to exist... *so that he is in a sense his own cause*’. Here the phrase ‘his own cause’... simply means that *the inexhaustible power of God is the cause or reason for his not needing a cause*. And since that inexhaustible power or immensity of the divine essence is as positive as can be, I said that the reason or cause why God needs no cause is a positive reason or cause...And I never said that God preserves himself by some positive force in the way in which created things are preserved by him; I simply said that the immensity of his power of essence in virtue of which he does not need a preserver is a positive thing.<sup>333</sup>

Descartes argues that God is self-caused because of his *essence*, which is therefore *the formal cause why God does not need an efficient cause*. In this sense Descartes claims that both efficient and formal causality are needed to understand God:

Those who follow the natural light will in this context spontaneously *form a concept of cause that is common to both an efficient and a formal cause*: that is to say, what derives its existence ‘from another’ will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as an efficient cause, while what derives its existence ‘from itself’ will be taken to derive its existence from itself *as a formal cause-that*

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<sup>333</sup> CSM II, 165.

*it because he has the kind of essence which entails that he does not require an efficient cause....*<sup>334</sup>

The same concept is found in a 1642 letter to an unidentified correspondent (Adam and Tannery suggest the correspondent is Mesland), where Descartes suggested that

for something to be the cause of himself *is for it to exist through itself, and to have no other cause than his own essence, which may be called a formal cause.*<sup>335</sup>

To sum up, Descartes endorses both the *negative* understanding of *causa sui*, i.e. the idea that God has no cause (where by “cause” Descartes intends “efficient cause” in a strict sense), and the *positive* understanding, i.e. the idea that God’s essence is the formal cause of his existence. The formal cause (God’s essence, understood as infinite power) explains why God does not need an efficient cause, or the kind of cause that every finite being needs both *secundum fieri* and *secundum esse*. In explaining God’s existence, the essence or formal cause “takes the place” of the efficient cause: which is why Descartes argues that, in a certain sense, we can think of the relation of God to himself in terms of his being his own efficient cause.

However we spell out Descartes’ position, he clearly intended to say that the reason behind the necessity of the existence of God, the reason why God cannot be conceived but as existing, and why, contrary to anything else, God does not need the *influxus* of an external efficient cause, is the immensity of God’s power. Descartes accepted that the “influxus” model of efficient causation could not be used to explain why God exists; however, he introduced the

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<sup>334</sup> CSM II, 166.

<sup>335</sup> CSM III, 213.

idea that the *causa sive ratio* of God's existence is something positive, i.e. the immensity of God's power.

Spinoza obviously accepts this line of reasoning; moreover, he does so without the Cartesian hesitation that we have seen above between affirming a *positive* cause of existence (in terms of a formal cause), and the more modest position of affirming a cause for why something does not need a cause. The equivalence between essence and power explains how to interpret Spinoza's statement that God is *causa sui*. This statement is often interpreted negatively, most recently in Carraud's *Causa sive Ratio*.<sup>336</sup> However, this interpretation has the serious shortcoming of failing to explain how Spinoza could use such negative notion to prove the infinite power of God, and the fact that God is the cause of himself in the same sense in which he is the cause of everything else. So, we need to interpret *causa sui* in a positive sense, based on the Cartesian idea that the infinite power of God explains everything (including God's existence); and therefore we need a model of causation that accounts for its use in *causa sui* as well as *in every other instance of causation*.

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<sup>336</sup> Carraud, in his *Causa sive Ratio*, claims that in Spinoza we do not have a proper "principle of sufficient reason"; rather, we have a "principle of non-contradicting reason." In other words, things in Spinoza do not happen so much because there is a cause that brings them about, but because there is no cause to prevent them. It is true that Spinoza makes abundant use of the "principle of non-contradicting reason" in his proofs, but Carraud fails to take into account Spinoza's *positive* ontology of power. God creates everything in his power both because of his power, and because there is nothing outside of him to stop him. Both sides must be taken into account, and Carraud's account is in my opinion imbalanced.

The negative interpretation of *causa sui* correctly captures two important tenets of Spinoza's *Ethics*: that there is nothing outside of God to *prevent* him from existing (for Spinoza, there must be a cause, or -epistemically speaking- *ratio* for something to exist and not to exist: this principle has no exception), and that there is nothing outside of him that could cause him to exist. Because God exists, and because there has to be a cause for him to exist, the cause can be nothing but God itself. However, the content of the *causa sui* claim must be more than this, if Spinoza wants to use it to show that God's essence is power, which he does in EI P34:

P34: God's power is his essence itself.

Dem: For *from the necessity alone of God's essence* it follows that God is the cause of himself (by P11) and (by P16 and P16C) of all things. Therefore, God's power, *by which he and all things are and act*, is his essence itself.<sup>337</sup>

But from EI P 20 we know that

God's existence and his essence are one and the same.

Dem: God (by P19) and all of his attributes are eternal, i.e. (by D8) each of his attributes expresses existence. Therefore, the same attributes of God which (by D4) explain God's eternal essence at the same time explain [explicate] his eternal existence, i.e. that itself which constitutes God's essence at the same time constitutes God's existence. So this essence and existence are one and the same, Q.E.D.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Curley vol. I page 439.

<sup>338</sup> Curley Vol. I page 428. I prefer translating *explicant* with "explicate."

So, God's essence, his power and his existence itself are one and the same thing. What does it mean, then, to say that God's existence *follows* from God's essence, or power, when Spinoza considers them *identical*? Better yet, what sense of "cause" is Spinoza using when he explicitly endorses what Descartes had rejected,<sup>339</sup> i.e. the idea that a substance is necessarily self-caused? In order to understand this, we must first realize that, together with a revision of the concept of essence and its relation to its causal powers (a relation of identity, in Spinoza), a new concept of *causation* has been introduced, in which the strong interpretation of the containment principle involves the idea that the effects are nothing but *expressions*, or necessary (from A 3) *outputs* of its cause. The term "out" (which I use to render the "ex" in *expressio*) is problematic in the case of God, because all of God's effects exist *in Deo*, not *ex Deo*. I will discuss this new model of expression in more details in the next section, but it is important to introduce the concept now in order to understand the meaning of *causa sui*.

In the case of God, which is *causa sui*, the essence of God, understood through its attributes, can only be conceived as existing because the nature of the attributes themselves, being basic ways of causing-existing of what can only be conceived through itself, *presuppose* existence. In other words, the essence of God is *expressed* in the existence of God, and vice versa: God's necessary existence is intelligible only through God's essence (constituted by infinite attributes), and God's necessary essence is intelligible only through its existence (because such essence is inconceivable as non-existing). God's essence and God's existence are expressions of each other; so, God's essence is identical with his existence, or God is *causa sui*.

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<sup>339</sup> Remember that Descartes denies that God is self-caused because he is his own efficient cause; for Spinoza, this is exactly the case (because of a different understanding of "efficient cause.")



God's essence and existence, in turn, are identical with God's power, as per EI 34. Notice that the proof of this proposition (quoted above) is based on God's being the cause of himself and of everything else. But we know, from EI P25 Sch, that:

P25: God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence....

Schol: This proposition follows more clearly from P 16. For from that it follows that from the given divine nature both the essence of things and their existence must necessarily be inferred; *and in a word God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself.* This will be established still more clearly from the following corollary.

Cor. Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way.

The proof of Sch to P 25, again, relies on the necessity of the divine essence: because of this one necessity, God and things *are and act*. So, only one necessary essence is the cause of both God's essence and existence, and of the essence and existence of individual things. P 34 concludes from this that God's essence must be identical with power, because only pure, infinite power can be the foundation of the kind of causation that Spinoza posits between God's nature and everything else... including God's nature.

To sum up: for Spinoza, God's essence, existence and power are one. Pushing the positive concept of *causa sui* introduced by Descartes in a radical direction, Spinoza uses it to argue that God's essence is power, instead of the other way around.<sup>340</sup> While the proof of the

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<sup>340</sup> As we have seen, Descartes argued that God is "in some positive sense" *causa sui* because of his power. Contrary to Descartes, Spinoza did not need to specify that God is not the

essence-power identity depends on the concept of *causa sui*, the concept itself of *causa sui* can only be understood (following Descartes' footsteps) in terms of a nature involving so much power to make it utterly independent. For Spinoza, this is the proper understanding of "substance," as we know. But notice that the ontological independence of the substance (i.e. the fact that it does not need a cause to exist and to continue existing) *is based on its essence being infinite power*. Being infinite power, in other words, implies being infinite existence; and being infinite existence and infinite power entails being (or causing as modes) all that can be.

Does the concept of *causa sui* constitute some sort of primary exemplar of causation for Spinoza? Is causation first and foremost *causa sui*, and only derivatively cause of everything else, as Carraud argues in *Causa Sive Ratio*? If I am right about Spinoza's commitment to univocity, then there is no primary sense of causation. The term *causa* must refer to the same kind of act, whatever the causal relata are. However, in an epistemic sense we can say that *causa sui* comes first. Because God is prior in being and understanding to his affections, and because understanding God involves understanding the concept of *causa sui*, it is true that, in a sense, *causa sui* comes prior to every other instance of causation: it is first *in our understanding*. But this does not mean that *causa sui* is more properly *causa* than other instances of causal relationship. Spinoza explicitly denied this when he wrote that God causes himself in the same sense of "cause" in which he is said to cause everything else.

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cause of himself in a different sense from the sense in which he is the cause of everything else, because he had already introduced an understanding of causation, based on the strong containment principle, that makes such distinctions useless.

## 5.5 “VERTICAL” CAUSATION: THE EXPRESSION OF GOD

So far, I have unproblematically adopted the distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” causation in order to refer, respectively, to God’s causal relationship to created things, and to created things’ causal relationships to one another. However, I need to point out something that at this point may be obvious: because of Spinoza’s univocity principle, the distinction between vertical and horizontal causation is problematic. In fact, as I will show in more detail in a later section, there is only one model of causation. However, the “vertical/horizontal” distinction still can be used with an important qualification: instead of indicating a different kind of causal activity (God’s vs. the created thing’s), it will refer simply to the causal relata. With this in mind, I will still use the distinction.

Spinoza’s discussion of causation at the vertical level, or the relationship between God and whatever is caused by God, is offered in *Ethics* I, ‘embedded’ in the discussion on substance.

Firstly, definitions are offered of *causa sui*, substance, mode, attribute, freedom and necessity, and God. Then, Spinoza introduced a short series of axioms, including the causal axioms 3, 4 and 5.

A3: From a given determinate *cause*, the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate *cause*, it is impossible for an effect to follow.

A4: The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the *cause*.

A5: Things that have nothing in common with one another also cannot be understood through one another; or the concept of the one does not involve the concept of the other.

A4 and A5 involve a statement of the similarity principle, or the idea that things that have nothing in common with one another cannot be the cause of one another; a conclusion that Spinoza will make explicitly in P3. A3 introduces a fundamental aspect of Spinoza's model of causation: the idea that, if the cause is posited, the effect necessarily *follows*. The import of this axiom can be fully understood in the context of Spinoza's revision of essence: it is because essences are their causal power that A3 makes sense. In other words, it is because the essence of X amounts to its power of bringing about Y and Z that Spinoza can say that, once X is posited, Z and Y necessarily follow. Because the power to bring about Y and Z is the very essence of X, if Y and Z did not occur then X could not be X. Together with A4 and A5, A3 brings about a model of causation based on the idea that effects are *necessary outputs of the essences of the cause*.

Let's return to the proofs in EI. The similarity principle, introduced explicitly in P3, is then used in P6 Cor to prove that *a substance cannot be caused by anything else*.

By ruling out caused, and therefore *created* substances, Spinoza dealt his first blow to traditional creation doctrines, including, of course, Descartes'. Notice that this radical conclusion follows from both the definitions and axioms regarding substance (conceived, quite traditionally, as ontologically and causally independent) and the containment and similarity principles: all elements that, as we have seen, were considered unproblematically acceptable.

Spinoza's next move is to deny that there can be such thing as a finite substance: those who claim that there is it, Spinoza wrote, simply have no clue of what substance is.<sup>341</sup> After

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<sup>341</sup> Notice that at this point (P 8) Spinoza introduced the first two of his series of illustrative *scholia*, targeting those who misunderstand the nature itself of substance. Sch. 2 P8 states "For by substance they would understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself."

denying that a substance can be caused by another substance, and introducing an ‘ancestor’ of Leibniz’s principle of identity of indiscernibles,<sup>342</sup> Spinoza concludes that a plurality of substances cannot exist.<sup>343</sup> He accomplishes this after establishing the existence of God, who is (of course) defined as a substance. So, with P 14 Spinoza introduces his statement of metaphysical *monism*, from which it follows that extension and thought can only be understood as *attributes* of God. At this point, we find another famous *scholium* attacking anthropomorphism and creation doctrines. While agreeing that God could not be ascribed such bodily features as “quantity, length, breadth and depth, limited by some certain figure,” Spinoza offers in this Scholium an indirect attack on the notion of eminent containment:

But meanwhile, by the other arguments by which they strive to demonstrate this same conclusion (i.e. that God has no bodily features) they clearly show that they entirely remove corporeal, or extended, substance itself from the divine nature. And they maintain that it has been created by God. *But by what divine power could it be created?* They are completely ignorant of that. And this shows clearly that they themselves do not understand what they say.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> This principle is established in P5: there cannot be two substances of the same nature, or they would be indistinguishable.

<sup>343</sup> After establishing that substances cannot cause each other, Spinoza needed to rule out that there could be more than one self-caused substance.

<sup>344</sup> *Ethics* I, P15 Sch; Curley page 421.

While not directly mentioning the notion of eminent containment, Spinoza dismissed the idea of a power that brings about something that is not contained in it as nonsensical. We find another implicit attack on eminent containment in Cor 2 to P 16:

Cor. 2: It follows, secondly, that God is a cause through himself, and not an accidental cause (*Deum causam essem per se, non vero per accidens*).<sup>345</sup>

Spinoza refers to the Scholastic notion (put forward in both Burgersdijk's and Heereboord's works<sup>346</sup> as well as in Suárez's *Metaphysical Disputations*) according to which a cause *per se* must produce something of its own kind, while the cause that produces something different from itself is called cause *per accidens*. Because God's essence has infinitely many attributes (including extension), everything that is conceivably existing can be caused by God *per se*, including, *pace* the Scholastics and Descartes, material things. The concept of eminent causation can be seen as causation *per accidens*: if everything created by God is incommensurably different from him, creation is causation *per accidens*.

At this point, we know that God is the one and only substance, and we also know that anything existing must be ontologically and causally dependent on God. P18 exposes a logical consequence of monism:

God is the *immanent*, not the transitive, cause of all things.

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<sup>345</sup> Cor. 2 top P16; Curley, page 425.

<sup>346</sup> Burgersdijk's *Institutiones Logicae*, and Heereboord's *Hermeiea Logica*. See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, Vol. I page 306-8, and *Short Treatise* ch. III (Curley vol. I p. 80-81)

Because no substance can exist besides God, all that exists must exist through and in God. God is truly cause *per se*: because whatever he causes is of the same substance. Only modal distinction is possible between a cause and an effect. Notice that this shows that Spinoza endorses the same strong version of the containment principle we have seen in *Short Treatise*: there simply is no thing which is not contained in God. On the other hand, everything that is in God's power (i.e., anything that can conceivably follow from an absolutely infinite cause) necessarily exists, necessarily *follows*:

P35: Whatever we conceive to be in God's power necessarily exists.

Dem: for whatever is in God's power must (by P34) be so comprehended by his essence that it necessarily follows from it, and therefore necessarily exists.<sup>347</sup>

What God causes must be so comprehended by its essence *as to necessarily follow from it*, as to be its 'irrepressible' output. This, again, shows Spinoza's break with the traditional notion of God's essence. There is more to it than containment.

Let us try to flesh out the meaning of this "necessarily follows" (*necesse sequi*). How is it that God's effects *follow necessarily*? How is it that, contrary to the voluntarist tradition, God cannot simply pick and choose which things to create? God is self-determined by his essence, but what exactly is in his essence that *necessitates* him to produce? We know that this conclusion depends on A3, as well as on E I P 34 (used to prove P35). But the question is, why do we have A3 to begin with?

The reason why these questions are important, as I already argued in the previous chapter, is that, after establishing a unique substance, Spinoza needed to explain diversity. He

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<sup>347</sup> Curley vol. I p. 439.

does that, as we have seen, through his revision of the concept of essence and its equation with power. While the explicit equation of essence with power will come later in Book 1, we know by now that the endorsement of the principle of plenitude<sup>348</sup> is a consequence of the above discussion on the essence of God, and of the new understanding of causation. P35 above is a clear statement of the principle of plenitude, based on Spinoza's understanding of the essence of God (i.e. an essence such as to necessarily produce everything that can be produced). However, the introduction of the principle of plenitude is in E1 P16, in which it is very clear that the principle follows from the essence of God:

P16: From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).

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<sup>348</sup> While Lovejoy was right in ascribing the principle of plenitude to Spinoza, his conclusion that the principle causes big problems for Spinoza's philosophy is questionable. According to Lovejoy's interpretation, the implication of the principle of plenitude for Spinoza's philosophy is that everything must be actual *at the same time*. For Lovejoy, given Spinoza's premises, no valid argument can be given to explain successive existence. The argument that Spinoza gives in Sch. to P17, that God's power "has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity" and thus positing the principle of plenitude prevents any possibility of succession. Lovejoy's interpretation does not take into account Spinoza's explanation of the succession of the finite modes as states in a *facies totius universi* that "although varies in infinite ways, yet remains always the same." God is always and already active in ways that follow necessarily from his nature, and in this sense are eternal truths that never change. See letter 64 to Schuller (page 299), and E II Lemma 7 Sch.



Dem.: This proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e. from the essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves. But since the divine nature has infinite attributes (by D6), *each of which also expresses in its own kind an infinite essence*, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes...<sup>349</sup>

P35 explicates what is implicit in P16, i.e. that it is the nature of God (which, we will see soon, is *power*) that explains the principle of plenitude. The opinion of those who argue that God could not have created everything that is in his power is dismissed in an important Scholium, which contains a reply to an argument we have seen in Herrera:

Others think that God is a free cause because he can (so they think) bring about that the things we have said follow from his nature (i.e. which are in his power) do not happen or are not produced by him. But this is the same as if they were to say that God can bring it about that it would not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles; or that from a given cause the effect would not follow-which is absurd. ... For they think that in that

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<sup>349</sup> Curley page 424-5. Notice that I modified Curley's translation. Curley, following Gueroult and Deleuze, translates the Latin "*Cum autem natura divina infinita attributa habeat, quorum etiam unumquodque infinitam essentiam in suo genere exprimit*" with "But since the divine nature has infinite attributes (by D6), each of which also expresses *an essence infinite in its own kind*." But there is no reason to assume that "*in suo genere*" refers to "*essentiam infinitam*" rather than to "*exprimit*."

way they would destroy God's power. If he had created all the things in his intellect (they say), then he would have been able to create nothing more, which they believe to be incompatible with God's omnipotence... But I think I have shown clearly enough that.... God's omnipotence has been *actual* from eternity and will remain in the same *actuality* to eternity. And in this way, at least in my opinion, God's omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly.<sup>350</sup>

In order to explain the relationship between God's essence and what follows from it (including God's existence), Spinoza introduced the concept of "expression," or *expressio*. To the best of my knowledge, there are no precedents of this use of the term, which may be the reason why Spinoza adopted it rather than the theoretically loaded term "emanation." The main similarity between the concept of expression, as used by Spinoza, and the concept of emanation is the idea of an *necessary outpouring* of something that is "pressed, or pushed out", which is central to this model of causation. While the differences between the emanation and the expression model of causation are important, the fact that their core concept is very similar makes me think that the emanationist model was the one that most of all inspired Spinoza's work, though he did not adopt the name.

"Expression" is meant to convey the relationship of this determined causal activity of *outpouring* and the essence of the cause, thus involving at the same time the containment principle and the principle of plenitude. Notice that the causal relata are never distinct, except

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<sup>350</sup> Sch. to EI P17, page 425-26. Compare with Herrera's response to determinism. This seems to me a clear answer to Herrera's argument. Also, compare with the version given in *Short Treatise*, where Spinoza claims that to say that God did not create everything that he could create is like saying that God does not understand everything that he could understand.

modally: God never really creates things that are separated from himself. Interpreters such as Curley and Bennett argued that for Spinoza the relationship between God and modes is the same relationship that exists between a subject and its properties, or, which is the logical equivalent, between a subject and its predicates. Such relationship of inherence, according to them, is rendered causal in Spinoza's philosophy through the concept of immanent causation. God is the immanent cause of whatever inheres to him. I think that this interpretation, while it has some plausibility and is supported by the traditional use of the term "attribute" and "mode" (even in Descartes), does not capture the complexities of God/mode relationship, and in particular it fails to take into account or to explain Spinoza's insistence on the term *expression*.<sup>351</sup>

Because of his commitment to univocity, Spinoza needed a model of causation that would account for *all* instances of causal relationships that exist in his metaphysical system, at both the vertical and the horizontal level (though there is no such thing as a real vertical-horizontal distinction for Spinoza, given that God *is* his modes). In particular, it would have to account for God's self-causation, for God's relationship to modes, and, of course, for the modes' relationships to each other. Spinoza accomplished this result with the introduction of the concept of expression in his discussion and use of causation.

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<sup>351</sup> It is useful to remind here a terminological shift from *Short Treatise* and *Ethics*. In *Short Treatise* Spinoza still used the language of predication. He may have realized that it did not convey effectively his metaphysics of power.

According to Deleuze, the notion of expression in Spinoza has its root, on one hand, in the tradition, going back to St. Augustine<sup>352</sup> and Scotus Eriugena,<sup>353</sup> holding that the world is a manifestation of God, or theophany; on the other hand, in the notion that everything that exists is an unfolding of God's nature and activity. In Deleuze's account, the latter tradition was elaborated in several, often related ways: from emanationism and Maimonides to the mysticism of Cusa and Meister Eckhart. In these mystic writers, expression is paired with the notion of immanence. For Nicholas of Cusa, God comprises all beings, and is expressed in all beings (*On Learned Ignorance*); for Giordano Bruno, God produces by an inward necessity that which is never separated from him (*On the Cause, Principle and One*). As I explained in a previous section, I believe Deleuze overstates the role of the "theophany" tradition in interpreting Spinoza. The whole tradition is based on the notion of an unknowable deity that *chooses*, out of its generosity, to make itself manifest. Spinoza rejected the concept of a personal deity making choices, as well as the concept of an *unknowable* deity (for Spinoza we can have an adequate idea of God's essence.) Moreover, Spinoza's fascination with Descartes and the epistemic ideal

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<sup>352</sup> See in particular *City of God* II.4: the world 'manifests' its nature as a creation of God, pointing to a maker whose qualities it reflects.

<sup>353</sup> Scotus Eriugena criticized Augustine's doctrine of the 'evening knowledge'. According to Augustine in *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, the knowledge of God we acquire through experiences of the created world is obscured by the embodied nature of things. For Scotus Eriugena, the world itself is a clear theophany. See the discussion in *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena*, by John J. O'Meara.

of mathematics and geometry (for their clarity and distinctness) makes it dubious that the very same philosopher would be influenced by mystics such as Cusa or Bruno.

In the previous chapter I argued that we can identify Herrera's *Gate of Heaven* and his Kabbalah-based emanationism as the most plausible source for Spinoza's concept of causation as expression. While Herrera, as we have seen, certainly shared with the previous authors the notion of the unknowable deity that chooses to make itself manifest, what makes Herrera a more interesting and relevant source is the fact that he considers the *sefirot* not as created things, but *forms of outpouring of power* that *both* make God manifest *and* allow him to create by expressing the fullness, simplicity and omnipotence of his activity in a way that is channeled toward production of actual created things. Herrera's discussion of these intermediate emanations/expressions probably inspired Spinoza's idea that God's power is expressed in basic ways, the attributes, that constitute his essence/power, i.e. that channel his productivity in ways that are both parallel and identical; and that, because all causation is God's causation, the idea that causation is the expression of an essence best conceived as causal power.

It is undeniable that Spinoza's model of causation inherited several elements from the emanative tradition, probably via Herrera, Suárez (through his quotes from Thomas' *Comment to the Book of Causes*), the Dutch Scholastics, Maimonides, and possibly (we have no evidence for, or against, this) through primary sources such as *The Book of Causes* or *Enneads*.<sup>354</sup> However, a

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<sup>354</sup> Wolfson's *The Philosophy of Spinoza* lists an impressive array of possible sources for Spinoza, but besides the fact that he often stops at vague similarities, he regularly fails to make the case that Spinoza did, or might have, accessed the source. This is a big flaw in his otherwise useful work.

cursory examination of the features of the emanationist model will show that the similarity is limited. The emanative tradition has been characterized as having the following elements:<sup>355</sup>

- What flows is different from the substance of the agent, but it is a sort of image (in Deleuze's interpretation, it *expresses* it).
- Emanation flows from the more to the less perfect.
- The effect is coexistent with the activity of the cause (as in the analogy with a water spring or sun rays).
- The outpouring follows necessarily from the nature of the cause (this element was rejected in Christian and Jewish interpretations, such as Maimonides', Herrera's, and the Scholastic tradition.)
- The cause is not diminished by the 'outpouring' of power: it does not loose any activity or power.

Emanationist models became more and more elaborated in order to explain the difficult step of the origin of matter and plurality. In *Enneads*, Plotinus 'postponed' the origin of matter to a series of principles in descending level or perfection (Intellect, Soul, Nature). This obviously begs the question, because, unless matter came from nothing, it had to be traceable to the One's essence, though in some "implicated" form. Also, the derivation of plurality from an absolutely simple principle did not satisfy critics.<sup>356</sup> Among these, Maimonides, who ascribed

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<sup>355</sup> This account is a simplified version of the one offered by Eileen O'Neill in "*Influxus Physicus*," in Nadler (ed), *Causation in Modern Philosophy*.

<sup>356</sup> This is not the right place for an extensive discussion of the differences between Plotinus' emanationist model and Spinoza's. It is interesting to point out, however, that Plotinus

emanationism to Aristotle,<sup>357</sup> openly discussed the problem. Maimonides thought he had solved it by introducing the notion that God's creation was not through necessary emanation (as in Plotinus' view), but through God's will and intellect; so did Herrera.

What elements of emanationism make their way into Spinoza's model of causation? Most importantly, as I already mentioned, the central idea of causation as the necessitated outpouring of activity from the cause's essence; necessitated, it is important to notice, by the nature and essence of the cause itself. However, given that Spinoza endorsed a strong form of the containment principle, this outpouring could only be *immanent*. The emanationist stated that the outpouring of causal activity in effects distinct from the First Cause did not lessen the First Cause's power. But, as we have seen in *Short Treatise*, Spinoza rejected this possibility: if the cause creates something that is ontologically separated from itself, what was contained in it is not

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saw emanation itself as ambiguous. While the outpouring of power from the One did not affect it in any way, the effects of such outpouring were seen as a 'falling away' from perfection.

Plotinus' attitude towards the transcendence of the One is ambiguous as well. He describes the One as transcendent (*Enneads*, I 7.i; V 2.1); however, he also wrote that the manifold must be brought into the Unity (VI 4. vii) and that nothing is severed from its prior in the chain of emanations (V 2.i).

<sup>357</sup> "I ask the following question: Aristotle holds that the first intelligence is the cause of the second, the second of the third, and so on, till the thousandth, if we assume a series of that number. Now the first intelligence is undoubtedly simple, How then can the compound forms of existing things come from such an intelligence...? What relation is there between material and immaterial beings?" *Guide of the Perplexed*, II,22. Maimonides referred to the Neoplatonic *Book of Causes*, which was ascribed to Aristotle until the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

contained any more, thus creating a lessening in power (and therefore of reality, of essence: inconceivable in God).

Another element that finds its way in Spinoza's concept of causation is the idea that the effects *are expressions of* the cause, or that causing is *expressing*; however, this idea is transformed, from a concept centered on "manifestation" to a concept centered on the *ex* (out) part of expression, the idea that the contained is "pushed" (*pressum*) out (*ex*). Because of the strong interpretation of *containment*, however, the outpouring of the expressions is always contained in the substance; thus, effects are only modally distinct from their cause. God's effects are his *modes*, not other substances. An individual mode's effects are other *modes*.

The verb "to express," *exprimere*, signifies both "to make manifest" (linguistically or not) and "to force out," "to outpour" something that was somehow compressed in something else's nature. While Herrera never used it, it is quite appropriate for his description of the relationship between God and the *sefirot*, and even more for the relationship between the One and its emanations in Neoplatonism. We speak of expressing feelings, artistic inclinations. Today, we use the term "expression" referring to the relationship between a gene and the effects of its *activation*. The underlying sense is of something that somehow 'needs' or 'is necessitated' to come out: something *contained* in the source pouring *out*, from (*ex*) the source, without necessarily becoming separate (like light from its source).

In Spinoza's philosophy, the use of the term "expression" is central. "Expression" shows up early on in *Ethics*, when God is defined as a being whose attributes *express* an infinite essence. The relationship of "expression" in Spinoza has three elements: what is expressed, what expresses it, and what it is expressed in (the vehicle or channel of expression). So, in God we



have (I am taking some liberties with Deleuze's triad of expression for reasons I already explained):

- God's infinite essence, which is expressed  
*through*
- God's attributes (*express-ings*) which express God's essence  
*in*
- Infinite and Finite Modes (*expressions*).

So, modes are expressions of God's essence/power in God's infinite attributes, or God's essence is expressed in infinite modes through the infinite attributes. Spinoza's criticism to Descartes' definition of extension as an attribute<sup>358</sup> was based on the fact that, in Descartes' description, the attribute of extension did not express an infinitely *active* essence, and hence could not account for existence of bodies, activity and motion without God's causal action on it.<sup>359</sup> On the other hand, extension in Spinoza's sense would allow one to infer the existence of bodies and their patterns of motions and rest (it is impossible to infer from extension itself the temporal existence of the individual body).

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<sup>358</sup> "Further, from Extension as conceived by Descartes, to wit, an inert mass, it is... impossible to demonstrate the existence of bodies. For matter at rest, as far as in it lies, will continue to be at rest, and will not be set in motion, except by a more powerful external cause..." Letter 82 to Tschirnhaus; page 352. See previous chapter and chapter 1 of this work.

<sup>359</sup> Spinoza's accusation is of course correct: Descartes did not intend to posit a matter that is active by its nature, independently of God. See chapter 1.

## 5.6 FROM CONTAINMENT TO EXPRESSION: A NEW MODEL OF CAUSATION

Spinoza used the verb “to express” both in a semantic and in a metaphysical sense. The first use is found, for example, in *Ethics* I, P8Sch., where Spinoza stated that a thing’s definition “expresses,” or “involves,” nothing but the nature of the thing defined.<sup>360</sup> This use is very traditional. Since Aristotle’s use of the term “definition” (λογος) in *Metaphysics* A, the mainstream philosophical tradition (to Spinoza’s time) had agreed that what definitions do is *to make manifest* to the intellect the nature, or essence, or account of the thing defined.<sup>361</sup>

The term “expression” in its metaphysical sense is used abundantly in *Ethics* to signify God’s relationship to his attributes and his modes. So, attributes express God’s infinite essence in finite and infinite modes:

D6: By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e. a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one *expresses the eternal and infinite essence*.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> See also letter 9 to De Vries, page 93 for another example of the semantic use of “expression.”

<sup>361</sup> Different philosophers offer different discussions of the meaning and relations of essence, nature and account; this topic goes beyond the scope of my discussion, given that Spinoza only uses “nature” (not capitalized) occasionally as a synonym of “essence.”

<sup>362</sup> *Ethics* I, D6; Curley vol. I page 409. Again, Curley inserts “an” where no corresponding Latin expression exists. I translate “*aeternam et infinitam essentiam exprimit*” with “expressed the eternal and infinite essence.” My reason for preferring this translation is that

Cor to P25: Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed (*exprimuntur*) in a certain and determinate way.<sup>363</sup>

The concept of expression allows Spinoza to form a *univocal* model of causation, to be used at the vertical as well as at the horizontal level. In fact:

- at both levels (God-modes, mode-mode) the effect is contained in the cause, so that the effect *expresses* the cause. Metaphysically, an expression is an outpouring of power in bringing about a new mode (or a change in God's affections-not in God's essence). Epistemically, this expression is the essence 'making manifest' what was contained in it (and can never be separated but modally); this is the reason behind EI A4 (it is because effects 'make manifest' their cause to an intellect that "knowledge of the effect involves knowledge of the cause"; it is because the essence contains the effect that "knowledge of the effect depends on knowledge of the cause")
- at both levels (God-modes, mode-mode), the effect is *conditioned*, determined by the essence of the cause, of which it is an immediate, necessary output. Again, this explains the epistemic-causal A4: because there is a metaphysical necessity in

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while Latin does not have the determinative article "the," it does have expressions equivalent to "a" (for example, "*quidam*"). Needless to say, there are philosophical implications: Curley's translation supports those who think that each attribute expresses a distinct essence, rather than each attribute expressing one and the same essence.

<sup>363</sup> *Ethics* I, P25 Cor.; Curley page 431.

the relation between a certain essence and certain effects, knowledge of the *content* of the essence brings with it knowledge of the effects, and knowledge of the effects involves knowledge of the essence that brought them about.<sup>364</sup>

Determinism is perhaps the most revolutionary, or disturbing (to Spinoza's contemporaries) revision. At Spinoza's time, determinism was confined to the realm of physical causation in the view of several philosophers, including Descartes. The effect of mechanical causes was determined by the nature of the cause. However, outside the physical realm, at the horizontal level of mental causation (mind over body), and more importantly at the vertical level, the very idea that God's power could be *constrained and determined* (even in the sense of "self-determined") was considered unacceptable. We have seen that writers such as Suárez, and to an extent Descartes himself (in his use of God's constancy in his account of the laws of motion) introduced a limited, conditioned necessity in God's operations; however, even the idea that God may be constrained by his own moral, or logical, nature was unpalatable to many, because it would involve limits on something that, by its nature, was supposedly the absolutely infinite. I will discuss this more extensively in the next section.

Spinoza endorsed the traditional notion of God's infinite, infinitely powerful essence being the cause of everything that there is. However, we have already seen since *Short Treatise* that for him the notions of causation and determinism cannot be separated, under penalty of incoherency. In other words, given the causal axiom *nihil ex nihilo* (and its consequence the

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<sup>364</sup> Of course there are different levels of perfection of knowledge. A perfect (adequate) knowledge of the cause brings with it an adequate knowledge of all its effects. A perfect knowledge of the effect, on the other hand, depends on knowledge of the essence of the cause, but this knowledge does not have to perfect. See Messeri's *L'epistemologia di Spinoza*.

containment principle), nothing is uncaused, and, as a consequence, *nothing is undetermined* (because indetermination equals lack of a cause). Even God's infinite essence and power are constrained by *what they are*. This necessary relation between the power itself (which constitutes the essence), what is contained in it, and the fact that what is contained can only 'outpour' *in certain ways* holds between all causal relata, be they God and himself, God and the world, and individual things. In this, I am convinced, Spinoza believed he was doing nothing but following existing metaphysical trends to their logical conclusions.

The concept of expression thus involves all the *desiderata* of Spinoza's model of causation, all the elements he needed for a concept of cause to 'do the job': the 'outpouring' of what was contained, the effect involving (and making known, in the epistemic facet of causation) the cause, and the fact that the outpouring can occur only through certain express-*ings*, or ways of expression. The attributes are these channels, vehicles, basic *ways* of expression; the actual expressions of God's activity are the modes. God's essence is expressed under different attributes, but, because the power is one and the same, the causal chain is one and the same:

Cor. To EI P7: God's power of thinking is equal to his actual power of acting. I.e. Whatever follows formally from God's infinite nature follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and the same connection.<sup>365</sup>

However, even if the power is one, the basic ways of activity, or attributes, do not interact. Spinoza is adamant in his rejection of causation among attributes: there is no causal action between bodies and minds, as reiterated in E II. The principle of plenitude in Spinoza is realized not because God's power of thinking has effects on God's power of producing, or creating (as in Leibniz, where God conceived all the logically compossible worlds, and then

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<sup>365</sup> Curley vol. I page 451.

chooses the best one), but because God's power of thinking (expressed by the attribute of thought) and God's power of producing are *one and the same essence* (power) expressed under infinite different attributes, or active in infinite different ways.

In chapters 1 and 2 I argued that two of the problems that Spinoza saw in Cartesian philosophy were the problems of representation and mind-body causation. Descartes could not explain how ideas represent things through the causal action of the body on the mind; ultimately, he had to conclude that the explanation of the representative power of ideas must be based on God. This does not mean that Descartes denied mind-body causation: he insistently claimed that we know for a fact, because of our first-person experience, that the mind and the body act on each other. However, this fact is 'explained' with one of the most question-begging 'explanations' in the history of philosophy: the infamous pineal gland, which Spinoza targeted in a sarcastic passage in the Introduction to *Ethics* IV. Explaining mind-body causation through what is nothing but an instance of mind-body causation does not take us very far, or at least this was certainly Spinoza's opinion.<sup>366</sup> Spinoza eliminated the problems by denying that the representationality of ideas has anything to do with mind-body causation, and by denying that

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<sup>366</sup> "What, I ask, does he understand by the union of mind and body? What clear and distinct concept does he have of a thought so closely united to some little portion of quantity? Indeed, I wish he had explained this union by its proximate cause. But he has conceived the mind so distinct from the body that he could not assign any singular cause, either of this union or of the mind itself. Instead, it was necessary for him to have recourse to the cause of the whole universe, i.e. God." (Curley, page 596) As I explained in the first chapter, Descartes' sense of causation was not univocal, and at the horizontal level the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom that would make mind-body causation problematic does not apply.

the latter is even possible.<sup>367</sup> Because mind and body are modes of different attributes, by the causal axioms 4 and 5 of *Ethics* I they cannot interact causally.

The negation of trans-attribute causation is based on the fact that the basic channels in which God's power is expressed are *irreducible*. The explanation of representation lies in the fact that God's activity, expressed under infinitely many attributes, including thought, is *one and the same*. Again, Spinoza accepts the notion that, given God's simplicity, God's intellect and power are one and the same, or that in God understanding and producing are one and the same activity:<sup>368</sup> however, Spinoza uses this traditional notion in an unprecedented way to explain representation. Ideas, including our ideas, represent things *because for God understanding and producing things are one and the same*. When we have an idea, it is an idea in God; and it

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<sup>367</sup> In his *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, Della Rocca solves the problem of the alleged (by Bennett and Delahunty) incompatibility between the mind-body identity claim, and the causal isolation between extension and thought. Della Rocca shows that for Spinoza attribute contexts (including, of course, causal claims about modes of a certain attribute) must be referentially opaque: the truth values of statements referring to modes of extension and thought depend on the attribute under which the the modes are conceived. In other words, even if mode of extension X and mode of thought X are numerically identical, a statement about X such as "Mode of extension B causes X" may be true or false depending on how whether X is conceived as a mode of extension or a mode of thought. Della Rocca rightly stresses that for Spinoza causal isolation goes on a par with conceptual isolation, though he does not explain the two (as I do) based on Spinoza's endorsement of the similarity principle.

<sup>368</sup> See Descartes' discussion on God's simplicity, in his correspondence with Mersenne.

represents its object because God understands and produces its object in one simple act. Ultimately, the explanation of representation lies “in the law of God’s nature alone,” or (which for Spinoza is the same) in the nature of things: not in the arbitrary choice of a transcendent God.

We see that the concept of expression is meant to convey how causality, even God’s causality, is constrained, *determined*, or *conditioned* (both terms used frequently referring to expression) in certain ways by the very nature or essence of the cause. “Expression” signifies a concept of causation working through basic and therefore irreducible ways of activity which do not interact with each other, though ultimately they *are* the same power.

Also at the “horizontal” level, in finite modes, power and essence are one and the same. In the discussion on *conatus* in part III, essence is equated with the power to cause, *activity* (as we will see in the next section). While modes do not have attributes, they exist *in* their attributes, they exist only *as modes* (states of activity) *of* God *in* these attributes.<sup>369</sup> Things are either thinking, or extended, or any other attribute God has, while they do not *have* these attributes (since only substance has attributes).<sup>370</sup> The power of individual modes, as well as the power of God, therefore, is expressed in their effects.

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<sup>369</sup> While both God and finite modes are extended and thinking, extension and thought do not belong to the essence of finite things. See E II D2, where Spinoza gives his definition of essence: modes cannot exist or be conceived without attributes, but not the other way around. Modes exist through the attributes as products of the pure power which is the essence of God.

<sup>370</sup> The attribute of thought is nothing but the infinite, unconditioned power of thinking. Expressions of this power (the finite modes of thought) are ideas, whose essence is conditioned power of thinking: accent on *conditioned*, dependent. Remember the definition of attribute as



Because God's essence, or the individual modes' essences, express themselves in their effects, the relationship of expression is *symmetrical* to that of causation. A mode *is an expression* of God (through his attributes), and *is caused by* God. While the infinite finite modes only exist *in* God, God only exists *in* these expressions. There is no God transcending the infinite expressions, the effects of his power.<sup>371</sup> While God is ontologically and conceptually prior, it would not make sense to conceive him without his effects, because these follow necessarily (E I P16), *express* his essence and power (EIP25Cor., EIP34 and 35), and are caused by God in the same sense in which he causes himself (EIP25Sch.). The analogy with the logical form *modus tollens* is useful: because God's effects are necessary effects, once we take those away we deny God, the same way, in a *modus tollens*, if we deny the consequent of an implication, we deny its antecedent.

Spinoza's 'descent' from the infinite to the finite modes may remind us of the emanationists' descent from the One to the lowest emanations. However, it is important to insist

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that which is conceived through itself: a mode's being extension or thought is not something conceived in itself, but something that is ontologically and epistemically dependent on the substance's being extension and thought.

<sup>371</sup> This is why I'd rather call Spinoza's philosophy pantheism rather than panentheism. Interpretations that claim that there is, after all, a residual of transcendence in Spinoza (Di Vona) are misleading. Di Vona devoted two volumes trying to make the case that the mode/substance ontological distinction in Spinoza implies that Spinoza endorsed a form of analogy of being, which Di Vona traces back to this or that Scholastic predecessor; and as a consequence that God is, after all, transcendent. The discussion is very thorough and the references to Scholastic philosophers are useful and interesting, but the conclusion does not follow.

on the fundamental differences between Spinoza's model and the emanationist model, the most important being the transcendence remaining in emanationist models. Emanations are not immanent in their source. Even Plotinus' ambivalence towards transcendence can hardly be construed as immanence: Plotinus would never accept the notion that the One is immanent to matter. It is also important to remember that Spinoza rejected any notion of a *descending* order of perfection in beings, which is an integral part of the emanationist model. Spinoza constantly argued against the idea that there are different degrees of "perfection" where "perfection" involves distance from an ideal. For Spinoza, "reality" and "perfection" mean the same thing. While there are more or less *real* things (depending on their activity, or power),<sup>372</sup> even the less perfect things are as perfect as they should be, since they all derive necessarily from a "perfect" Being, where "perfect," again, means full being, reality and activity.<sup>373</sup> For Plotinus, on the other hand, things are more or less perfect depending on their distance from the transcendent First Cause.

To sum up schematically all that has been discussed so far, here are the features of Spinoza's expression model of causation:

- Because of its essence, the cause *contains* the effect: or, the containment principle applies (see EIP35);
- The essence of the cause *is* the power to bring about the effect, or (which is the same thing) what explains the effect, and nothing else: see E I, P 34, III P7.

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<sup>372</sup> In the last three parts of *Ethics* Spinoza discusses the mind's passing through different levels of activity and power as becoming more or less perfect. See, for example, E V P 40.

<sup>373</sup> See EI P 11 Sch., Appendix to EI, and General Definition of Affects (E III).

- The effect is an *expression, product, or output*, of the power, or essence, of its cause.
- The essence of the cause and the effect must be conceived either under extension or under thought. These are basic, irreducible activities, or *express-ings* of God's power. Inter-attribute causation is impossible (see E II, P 5 and P6).
- The effect is objectively, but not *really* distinct from the cause:<sup>374</sup> it is not a different substance, though there is an actual distinction (i.e. more than a mere distinction of reason). Only modal distinction is possible, because a substance cannot create another substance. God is only modally distinct from his effects; modes are only modally distinct from their effects. Follows from E I, P14 and 15, where Spinoza proves that there is only one substance: God. As a result, in Spinoza's philosophy *there are no real individuals* besides the one substance.
- The effect is distinct from the cause in what it receives from the cause, i.e., what expresses the power and activity of the cause differs *in the power or activity* from the cause (see E I P17 Sch. 2, to be discussed later.)<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> This does not mean that the cause-effect distinction is an illusion. I am using "real" in the sense of "substantial."

<sup>375</sup> The last element in the model refers to Sch. to P17, stating what Schmaltz dubbed the "dissimilarity principle." In the case of God's self-causation, the dissimilarity principle from Sch. to P17 is problematic. Obviously, the conclusion that God, being his own cause, must be dissimilar from himself in both essence and existence is *prima facie* absurd. I guess we can fault Spinoza for not discussing this important problem (which escaped the attention of his

## 5.7 SUBSTANTIAL AND MODAL CAUSATION

Part of my claim is that Spinoza wanted a model of causation that was univocal and sufficient to explain all causal relationships, both at the horizontal and the vertical level (remember that, as I specified in a previous section, I am using the terms “horizontal” and “vertical” with reference to two different causal relata, not to two different forms of causation). The containment/expression model does that. However, while the model applies *univocally* to substance and modes, there is a “substantial” way to cause, and there is a “modal” way to cause, *because of the ontological difference between the causal relata* (God-mode vs. mode-mode). While mode-on-mode causation is an application of the model as well, there are distinctions to be made, due to the fact that both the causal relata are modes.

Most interpreters agree with the opinion that Spinoza wanted to ascribe some genuine form of causation to modes. I agree as well. In the same ways that the existence of modes is *real* existence (though not substantial), modes have a *real* form of causation which reflects their ontological status as modes. Modes cannot exist, be thought, or cause independently of the

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correspondents as well). However, as I will discuss in a later section, I believe that the dissimilarity principle can be contextualized within Spinoza’s distinction between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. *Natura Naturans* is the essence, or power, of God which is ontologically and causally (though, of course, not temporally) prior to modal expression; while *Natura Naturata* is God expressing himself in, and *causing himself in*, those modes that *follow* (i.e., explicate what was contained) immediately and mediately from God’s essence. In this sense, *natura naturata* differs in both essence and existence from *natura naturans*.

substance they are expressions of. Spinoza had made that very clear in the first part, with EI P 16 Cor, P18, and P24 Cor.

Before beginning the discussion on modal causation, it is important to remember that modes are not individuated absolutely for Spinoza. Since they are not substances, they can neither exist nor be conceived independently, but only as affections of the substance, affections that have been caused by other affections. Moreover, Spinoza denies that substance can be divided into parts: if modes were absolute individuals (i.e. conceivable independently of each other), this would undermine the claim that substance is indivisible.

Here is why. In *Ethics* I, Sch. to P15, Spinoza argues against the claim that extended substance can be divided into actually distinct parts. His argument is especially directed against Descartes, who accepted a plurality of extended substances, but rejected the vacuum:

All those who know that clear reason is infallible must confess this - particularly those who deny that there is a vacuum. For if corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were really distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before? And why must they be so fitted together that there is no vacuum? *Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other.*<sup>376</sup>

The limits of the concept of individual “parts” in Spinoza’s philosophy is clarified in his famous example, offered in a 1665 letter to Oldenborg, of a “worm in the blood”:

By coherence of parts I mean simply this, that the laws or nature of one part adapts itself to the laws or nature of another part in such wise that there is the

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<sup>376</sup> Curley, page 423.

least possible opposition between them.... Insofar as they are different from one another, to that extent each one forms in our mind a separate idea and is therefore considered as a whole, not a part... Now let us imagine, if you please, a tiny worm living in the blood , capable of distinguishing by sight the particles of the blood -lymph, etc.- and of intelligently observing how each particle, on colliding with another, either rebounds, or communicates some degree of its motion, and so forth. That worm would be living in the blood as we are living in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not as a part, and it could have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood and compelled to mutual adaptation as the overall nature of the blood requires, so as to agree with one another in a definite way. For if we imagine that there are no causes external to the blood, which would communicate new motions to the blood, nor any space external to the blood, nor any other bodies to which the parts of the blood could transfer their motion, it is beyond doubt that the blood would remain indefinitely in its present state, and that its particles would undergo no changes other than those which can be conceived as resulting from the existing relations between the motion of the blood, and the lymph, chyle, etc... Now all the bodies in Nature can and should be conceived in the same way as we have conceived the blood: for all bodies are surrounded by others and are reciprocally determined to exist and to act in a fixed and determined way, the same ratio of of motion to rest being preserved in them taken all together...<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Letter 32 to Oldenburg; pages 193-4.

The distinction between parts is relative to the observer, and *no “part” can be truly distinct in a way that makes no reference to its causal relationships to other bodies.*<sup>378</sup> This ontological status involves that modes can only be individuated in their relationships to each other, or with respect to their position in the causal chain.<sup>379</sup> In other words, modes can only be individuated by referring to their relationships with other modes, rather than by referring to their own individual essence. The essence itself of a mode, being power and activity, is defined in relation to causation. In other words, as for God, there is no essence prior to causation: things are defined in terms of what they do with and to other things. Individuation, in Spinoza, is never absolute. There are no individual “things” that are separable from other “things.” In fact, considering Spinoza’s definition of essence as power and activity, rather than some “quiddity” antecedent any causal power, both substance and modes should not be understood as having a status as “things,” but rather, to borrow a term from 20<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics, as “*processes*.”

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<sup>378</sup> For a different, but interesting reading of Spinoza’s use of the term “parts,” see Laurent Bove’s *La Stratégie du Conatus*, Ch. 6. While Bove does not discuss explicitly containment, he does mention that the effect is made by Spinoza a “part” of the cause. Bove also discusses “strategies of individuation,” a concept to some extent compatible with my reading of individuation in terms of positions on the causal chain, or individuation based on causal activities.

<sup>379</sup> See also, for example, EII Def. after A 2”, where individuation in bodies is defined in terms of their causal relationship to their component parts, and EII D 7, where Spinoza states that a collection of parts is defined as an individual thing if it brings up an effect. In other words, things are individuated because of their role in causal interactions.

Defined as “a sequentially structured sequence of successive stages or phases,”<sup>380</sup> processes are the most basic entities in this alternative to a traditional metaphysics that considers them as derivative to things. While I will not and cannot make the case in this work that Spinoza’s metaphysics (which, after all, is based on the notion of *substance*) belongs to process ontology, I like to point out that one can seriously misconstrue Spinoza unless one understands that modes and substance are nothing beyond their power. Not “things with power”: *power*. “Individual” modes, therefore, are patterns of activity (activity of thought/activity of production) that can only be identified in their relation to other patterns of activity.

Modes and substances *exist*. However, the existence of modes is conditional on the existence of substance, and is understood only through it. This does not mean that modes do not have existence proper, but only that they can have the existence of *modes*, which is a conditioned, dependent existence. The same way, modes *cause* as well as substance, though, as we will see, they can cause only in a conditioned sense. However, they cause in the same sense in which substance causes.

The fact that modes are not absolute individuals, or individuals that are really distinct and can be conceived independently of other modes, is important in order to understand why Spinoza insists that modes are *conditioned* expressions of God’s power. Something’s being “conditioned,” or (in Spinozese) “determined” (*determinatum*) means that it depends on something else for its existence and its conception. Modes depend “vertically” on God, and “horizontally” on other modes. God understood as the cause of mode B is “conditioned” in the

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<sup>380</sup> Nicholas Rescher, “Process Philosophy,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The “structure” that Rescher refers to can be traced in Spinoza’s reference to a stable ratio of motion and rest that permanes (to an extent) through change.



sense that he can only be the cause of mode B if and only if he has caused mode A beforehand; i.e. God can cause mode B on the condition that he causes mode A beforehand, or, which is the same, the fact that God causes mode A determined that he will cause mode B. Mode A and B are states or activities of God that can only be individuated in reference to other states or activities, not absolutely.

In the realm of horizontal causation, or mode-on-mode causation, the concept of expression as well as the equation essence-power apply. Such power is nothing but God's own power, except that it is conditioned and determined, rather than infinite and unconditioned. Everything that exists is an expression of the power of God; however, God's power is not conceivable outside, or independently, of these expressions. God's immediate (vertical) power is inconceivable except as, or is nothing but, what is expressed under an attribute; God's mediate (horizontal) power<sup>381</sup> is inconceivable except as, *is nothing but*, what is expressed under an attribute considered to be affected by some other mode (EIP28 dem.), or as an activity that takes place because determined by another activity.

EI P33 offers the link between the principle of plenitude, expression and determinism:

Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.

Dem: For all things have necessarily followed from the necessity of God's nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way ... Therefore, if things could have been of another nature, or could have been determined to produce an effect in another way... *then God's nature could have been other than it is now*, and

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<sup>381</sup> In this talk of God's mediate power it is necessary to keep in mind that God's causation is always immanent.

therefore (by P11) that [other nature] would also have had to exist, and consequently there could have been two or more Gods, which is absurd...<sup>382</sup>

The activity, or power, that is the nature of God exists only in certain *ways*. The basic ways of activity are the attributes, and their infinite immediate modifications express immediately God's power of thinking or producing. Because God's power, or essence, is nothing but its expressions, be they finite or infinite, it is inconceivable that a mode could be different from what it really is; and because a mode's essence is its causal power, it is impossible that a mode's causal output could be different than what it is. It is important here to remember the importance of Spinoza's revision of the concept of essence, and his elimination of the degree of separation between essence and power. If an effect is an expression of the essence of the cause, counterfactuals are impossible, because they would involve that the essence of the cause must be different from what it is. This would not be a problem, if powers were conceived as accidents (as in the Scholastic tradition). In the case of God, of course, it is inconceivable that his essence could be any different from what it is; however, since in Spinoza the essence of finite things is an expression of God's essence, any change in the effects of finite things (i.e., any counterfactual situation in which mode X did not cause mode Y) would involve a change in the essence of God.

It is in *Ethics* V that Spinoza stated his conclusion about the causal power of things:

The *power by which singular things... preserve their being* is the power itself of God, or Nature... not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained by the man's actual essence. The man's power, therefore, *insofar as it*

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<sup>382</sup> Curley page 436.

*is explained through his actual essence*, is part<sup>383</sup> of God or Nature's infinite power, i.e., of its essence.<sup>384</sup>

This refers to the discussion of *conatus* in part III, where *conatus* is a thing's actual essence, and what explains the thing's being *active*.

The striving (*conatus*) by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself.

Dem: From the given essence of each thing some things necessarily follow (by IP36), and *things are able [to produce] nothing but what follows necessarily from their essence alone*. So the power of each thing, or the *striving by which it... does anything*, or *strives to do anything*, i.e. (by P6) the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing itself<sup>385</sup>.

Things can only cause what follows from, or is contained in, their essence. But their actual essence is their *conatus*, because their actual essence is (as per *Ethics* III P6) *the power of*

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<sup>383</sup> It is important to remember that "part" (*pars*) must be intended metaphorically, as explained earlier in this section. Spinoza is adamant that substance, or God, is not divisible in parts; however, God's power is expressed in modes that, insofar as they are conditioned, limited expressions, are also partial (as opposed to total) expression, and, as such, can be loosely considered as "parts," as long as one remembers that no real distinction among parts can be made.

<sup>384</sup> *Ethics* IV, P4 Dem; Curley 548.

<sup>385</sup> *Ethics* III, P7; Curley page 499.

*God expressed in a determinate way:*<sup>386</sup> therefore it is activity, and cannot contain anything against their being, the same way God's essence, or power, does not contain anything contrary to his being.

In EI, P34 Spinoza tells us that “God's power, *by which he and all things are and act*, is his essence itself.” Because the essence of a finite mode is the power of God (not *qua* absolute, but *qua* conditioned by another mode), its effects are as well expressions, “outpourings” of the power, or essence, of God. While all modes, in their totality, express the power of God absolutely, each of them expresses the power of God *qua* conditioned by another mode (“in a certain and determinate way”). In other words, we have the essence of God expressed *absolutely* (in the totality of modes constituting *natura naturata*), and the essence of God expressed *conditionally*, i.e. an expression of the essence of God that takes place not absolutely (i.e. following from the infinite essence itself), but only given another expression (and this is for every individual finite mode). But it is the power of God, and *only* the power of God, which is expressed, because *there is no other power besides the power of God*. Remember the triad of expression: only God is expressed; modes are his expressions, according to those basic ways of activity, or express-ings, which are the attributes.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> As opposed to determined by the absolutely infinite essence of God. Remember that for Spinoza to be caused is to be determined, and nothing is uncaused: God is self-determined, not absolutely free.

<sup>387</sup> In their works *Affects et conscience chez Spinoza: l'automatisme dans le progres ethique* and *La stratégie du conatus*, Syliane Malinowski-Charles and Laurent Bove offer an interpretation that explain the causal relationship between God and the finite modes in terms of a

While in both substantial and modal causation the effect expresses its cause, because modes are causes only insofar they are expressions of God's power, all that they can express is their being *conditioned* power of God. In other words, when mode A causes mode B, it is the power of God *qua* mode A that causes mode B. Hence, if we say that mode B expresses its cause, we are saying that mode B expresses the *conditioned* power of God which forms the essence of mode A.<sup>388</sup> It is for this reason that, as Ax. 4 states, knowledge of an effect involves the knowledge of its cause: mode B expresses the conditioned power of God *qua* mode B, which, as above, involves (or expresses) the conditioned power of God *qua* mode A. And so on and so forth.

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loop, where modes are caused by God but in a sense they also *cause* God, and in this sense they participate in their own production. As Bove puts it, "in returning to their cause, each mode participates in its own production... The paradigm of the recursive loop of Nature and its self-constitution is therefore applied to each mode..." Their argument is that, if it is true that God cannot exist without producing, then the modes contribute to the very existence of God as necessary conditions. I suspect this interpretation confuses Spinoza's claim that God cannot exist except as infinite activity (and therefore that it is inconceivable that his effects could not exist) with the position, never expressed by Spinoza, that somehow God depends on his modes in order to exist. All of Spinoza's texts consistently maintain that the ontological and causal dependence is unidirectional: modes are caused and depend on their cause, never the other way around.

<sup>388</sup> The power of God is conditioned in every mode because for every mode A there is a prior mode which is the condition of A. In fact, Spinoza explicitly states that the modal causal chain goes on *ad infinitum*. The argument is offered in E I P28.

At the same time, finite modes can be said to have real causal action, *qua* modes. Because modes are nothing above and beyond the power of God expressed under an attribute in a determined way, to say that God causes mode B when his power is expressed in mode A is the same as saying that mode A causes mode B. This is because mode A is defined as, and *identical with*, God's power as expressed in mode A; in other words, there is nothing to mode A but being God's conditioned, *expressed* power. On the other hand, mode A is modally distinct from mode B because they have different essences/causal powers, i.e. because they have different positions in the causal chain. In other words, they are brought about by different causes and can bring about different effects. If ascribing causal actions to modes because of their essences, and then defining essences in terms of causal actions, sounds circular, it is because it is in fact circular to some extent. But this would be a problem only if Spinoza endorsed the absolute individuation of modes, which in fact he rejects. We have seen in the beginning of this section that for Spinoza modes are individuated only by their positions in their causal chain; so much so that an individual is composed of other individuals that can continue existing once the larger individual is dissolved. "Individual" is a relative concept: causal activities, or expressions, are prior to individuals. So, modal causality is authentic, because modes are nothing but expressions of the power of God. As a contrast, remember Descartes, in whose metaphysics (as interpreted by Spinoza) individual bodies are really distinct from God, but have no real causal action. In Spinoza, individual bodies are only modally distinct from God, and are authentic causes *qua* mode: they *are* the causal power of God (as per EI P34).

## 5.8 CONTAINMENT, UNIVOCITY, AND THE DISSIMILARITY PRINCIPLE

As we have seen in this section, Spinoza elaborated a new concept of essence and causation that can account for all possible realms of experience. From what he wrote in *Ethics* I, P8 Sch., it is clear that Spinoza thought of himself as restoring the true meaning of substance, not as an innovator:

But if men would attend to the nature of substance, they would have no doubt at all of the truth of P7.<sup>389</sup> Indeed, this proposition would be an axiom for everyone, and would be numbered among the common notions.<sup>390</sup>

Confusion about the nature of substance and the true first cause of things explains philosophical mistakes that, in turn, cause false hopes and misery (as discussed extensively in *Ethics*, IV, “On Human Bondage”), dragging men farther and farther away from that happiness that can only come from the knowledge of the true nature of man, as Spinoza stated in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Spinoza reconstructed metaphysics starting from the principle of methodological univocity. Substance and causation are defined univocally. There is only one way to be substance, there is only one way to be cause. Both univocal accounts (of causation, and of substance) start from premises that Spinoza rightly (at least for his times) considered universally acceptable: the doctrine of ontological independence for substance, the *nihil ex nihilo* axiom and the principles following from it for causation.

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<sup>389</sup> EIP7: “It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.” Curley vol I page 412.

<sup>390</sup> Curley vol. I page 413.

Earlier in this work, I illustrated the Cartesian “keeping the distance” problem: the constraints of the theological doctrine of transcendence imposed equivocal understandings of key metaphysical concepts such as substance and causation. Between transcendence and univocity, Spinoza chose univocity, consistently with the “simplify!” imperative that was Descartes’ own battle cry against the Scholastics (at least theoretically). Starting from a strong interpretation of the containment principle, Spinoza rejected any form of non-immanent causation. On the other hand, the adoption of the principle of plenitude, following from a new concept of the essence of God as pure, self-necessitated (i.e. constrained by the structure of the essence of God-qua constituted of infinite attributes) power, added determinism.

In a previous section, I discussed how Spinoza’s elaboration of the principle of plenitude through the introduction of the concept of *expression*, allowed him to solve another problem he saw in Cartesian philosophy: the problem of the nature of representation and mind/body causation. Spinoza solved the problem by denying that representation has anything to do with mind-body causation, and denying that the latter is even possible. The negation of trans-attribute causation is possible because Spinoza introduced the idea that God’s power is expressed in infinitely many basic activities or *express-ings*, the attributes (which include the activity of thinking and the activity of production), each of which cannot be reduced to any other. Spinoza elaborated the expression/causation model in such a way to make a case for individuating causal relata in the context of modal causation, albeit in a relative sense of “individuating” (we have seen that Spinoza reject absolute individuation or real distinction of parts). While God is the immanent cause of everything that exists, we have experience of particular, though not purely individual,<sup>391</sup> causes and effects, and Spinoza would not dismiss such experience as an illusion.

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<sup>391</sup> Spinoza uses both “particular” and “individual” in his discussion.



The way to achieve consistency between monism, on one hand, and the existence of particular finite modes with authentic causal powers on the other, is to establish an authentic plurality of individual, numerically distinct *modes*.

Numerical distinction is not *real*, or substantial; substance is not divisible into parts, and Spinoza rejects substance pluralism. However, insofar as each individual is considered as an expression of God's power, from which other expressions will necessarily follow, it is distinct from all the other expressions. In the previous section, I explained that modes are individuated from each other not because of some essence that is prior to their causal activity, but because of this very causal activity. Modes are in different causal relations to each other, and these very causal relations are what individuates them, because there is nothing more basic to a mode's essence than its causal activity. This modal distinction is real and, given Spinoza's new ontology, barely problematic. Spinoza is not Parmenides.

Modal causation is possible and real as well. Because modes are nothing but individual expressions of God's power, God's causal activity *is* their causal activity. The picture is very dissimilar from the semi-occasionalist picture one can (and certainly Spinoza did) read in Descartes' treatment of extension. In fact, this was one of Spinoza's most insistent criticisms of Descartes.

One last question remains. Spinoza's implicit insistence on methodological univocity seems to be hardly consistent with the Scholium to P17 in which Spinoza states what Tad Schmaltz dubbed the "dissimilarity principle":

For what is caused differs from what caused it *precisely in what it has from the cause*. E.g., a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth. Hence, they must agree entirely

according to their essence. But in existing they must differ. And for that reason, if the existence of one perishes, the other's existence will not thereby perish. But if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other's essence would also be destroyed.<sup>392</sup> (EIP17 Sch. II)

Spinoza introduced this new causal axiom as an argument for why God's intellect is different in both essence and existence from our own. It is part of Spinoza's more general case against an anthropomorphic God. Since God is the cause of both the essence and the existence of a man's intellect, then God's intellect must be dissimilar from that of its effects in both essence and existence. But what of the similarity principle, or the idea that the cause must have something in common with its effect? In other words, if God's intellect has nothing in common with mine, how can it be its cause, given causal axioms 4 and 5 in EI?

The difficulty did not escape the attention of two of Spinoza's friends, von Tschirnhaus and Schuller. The latter questioned Spinoza in his 1675 letter 63:

Secondly, since God's intellect differs from our intellect both in essence and in existence, it will therefore have nothing in common with our intellect, and therefore (Book 1, Proposition 3) God's intellect cannot be the cause of our intellect<sup>393</sup>.

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<sup>392</sup> Curley, vol. 1, p. 427.

<sup>393</sup> Ep. 63, page 296. Schuller and Tschirnhaus point to a contradiction with EIP3, which says: "*If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.* Dem.: If they have nothing in common with one another, then (by A5) they cannot be understood by one another, and so (by A4) one cannot be the cause of the other." Axiom 4 and 5

Spinoza's reply, as it sometimes happens, is frustratingly unhelpful:

... And so I pass on to the second question, which asks whether, when both essence and existence are different, one thing can be produced by another, seeing that things that differ thus from one another appear to have nothing in common. I reply that, since *all particular things, except those that are produced by like things, differ from their causes both in essence and in existence*, I see no difficulty here.<sup>394</sup>

Spinoza's reply is unhelpful for two reasons. The first is that he referred to "all particular things, *except those that are produced by like things*," therefore undermining what seemed to be his main claim in Sch. 2 to P17, i.e. the notion that like things *cannot* be produced by like things (which also refers to particular things, i.e. existing men –only particular men can exist). Secondly, Spinoza did not address the real problem: the *prima facie* contradiction between

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are central to the structure of *Ethics*. Together, they state the similarity principle, the containment principle and the correspondence of conceptual and causal isolation in Spinoza's system.

<sup>394</sup> Ep. 64, p. 299. Emilia Giancotti, in the comment to her Italian translation of *Ethics*, suggested that in EI P17 Sch. Spinoza used the dissimilarity principle for rhetorical purposes. In other words, Spinoza did not really endorse the dissimilarity principle, but used it to illustrate the position (which, according to Giancotti, he actually rejects) that God's intellect and will are dissimilar to human intellect and will, though the former cause the latter. If Giancotti were right, then why would Spinoza defend the dissimilarity principle against Schuller's objection in the quoted letter? He could have explained that he did not endorse the principle, instead of appealing to everyday experience. Spinoza's reply to Schuller shows that for Spinoza the causal dissimilarity principle was not simply a rhetorical device.

axioms and propositions stating that things with nothing in common *cannot* be in causal relationships with one another, endorsing the causal containment and similarity principles, and the mysterious axiom popping up in Sch. 2 to EIP17, which states that the effect *differs* from the cause “in that which it receives from the cause.” If the effect differs from the cause in what it receives from the cause, i.e. exactly in *what should have been contained in the cause*, the causal principles become *prima facie* problematic.

In *Spinoza*, vol. I: *Dieu*, Martial Gueroult tried to offer an explanation of what it means, according to Spinoza, that what cause and effect have in common is *not* what is “given” by the cause to the effect. In Gueroult’s example, God and bodies have in common extension: of which God is not the cause, because it is an attribute.<sup>395</sup> In order to flesh out Gueroult’s interpretation in the light of a Cartesian passage from *Conversation with Burman*, Tad Schmaltz<sup>396</sup> suggests that the key is Spinoza’s distinction between cause and effect in terms of their being agent and patient, i.e. *activity* vs. *passivity*. Activity exists insofar as a thing is the adequate cause of its effects; passivity insofar as a thing needs something else in order to explain what happens to it.<sup>397</sup> The “dissimilarity principle” exposed in EI P17 Sch 2 makes sense in this context, writes Schmaltz, because here Spinoza (like Descartes in *Conversation with Burman*<sup>398</sup>) was simply

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<sup>395</sup> Gueroult, *Spinoza* Vol. I: *Dieu*, page 290.

<sup>396</sup> Tad Schmaltz: “The Disappearance of Analogy in Descartes, Spinoza, and Regis.”

<sup>397</sup> *Ethics* III, D1-3.

<sup>398</sup> Schmaltz is not implying that Spinoza read *Conversation with Burman*, a claim that would be hard to support. He is simply pointing at an analogy between the thinkers.

stating that a cause is ‘applying’ activity to what is passive, thus differing, *in this activity*, from its effect.

In other words, what the cause ‘gives’ to the effect, or better yet, what it *brings about* as an effect<sup>399</sup> is what was contained in the cause, what followed from it, what was in its *power* to bring about. But notice that *it is not the power itself* that is brought about as an effect. However, if this is the case, the dissimilarity principle and the similarity principle are two faces of the same coin. While the similarity principle states that the cause must have something in common with the effect in order to bring it about, it seems pretty straightforward that the cause cannot be the same thing as the effect. They cannot be identical. But they would be identical, if they were not *dissimilar* under some respect. It seems to follow, therefore, that what constitutes the cause’s power to act and bring about its effect (i.e. its essence) must also be what differentiates it from the effect.

As I discussed in the previous section, there is no real distinction between a substance and its modes, or between two modes. There is no real individuation; only modal distinction exists. The causal relata, whether we are speaking “horizontally” or “vertically,” are never distinct things. The only factor that distinguishes them is their causal role; and in a relationship of cause and effect this means that there is an element of activity in the cause (its very own *essence*) that brings forth an effect that previously did not exist except in the sense that it was contained in the cause. The effect was contained in the cause *as power*, and exists now as an effect, as the outcome, or the *expression* of this power. The power and its expression are distinct in exactly this sense. So, in the realm of extension, all bodies have in common that they are

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<sup>399</sup> I prefer to avoid the ‘giving’ terminology, which is reminiscent of the transference models of causation, which Spinoza did not use.

extended and they have certain properties that follow from their being extended (they have a shape, a size, and are always in states of motion or rest). Insofar as all this *follows* from God's activity as extended thing, things are distinct from God exactly because they are his products, his expressions. But, as Gueroult explained, insofar as they are extended, they are not caused by God, because extension (an attribute) *is not caused by God*.

Spinoza draws a distinction between the essences of things (of man, of triangle, etc), and the essences of things existing in act (Socrates, this triangle). The latter are particular men, triangles, etc., instantiated in the ratios of motion and rest that constitutes the actual essence of an individual, or, which is the same, its causal activity.<sup>400</sup> The former are all the patterns of motion and rest that follow immediately from the nature of extension: in other words, from the nature of extension (i.e. of God as an active extended thing) follow infinite patterns of motion and rest (kinds of processes), which are in turn instantiated in singular existing things comprehended in the infinite mediate mode, or what Spinoza, in his 1675 letter to Schuller, calls *facies totius universi*.<sup>401</sup> The essence of man is simply the range of patterns of motion and rest among parts

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<sup>400</sup> See next section for a more detailed discussion. When discussing "individuals," I use the term in Spinoza's sense of a relative individuation.

<sup>401</sup> There is an ongoing debate on why exactly, when asked by Schuller to offer examples of immediate and mediate infinite modes of extension and thought, Spinoza offered an example of infinite mediate mode only for extension (*facies totius universi*). For a recent discussion of alternatives, see Syliane Malinowski-Charles' *Affects et conscience chez Spinoza: l'automatisme dans le progres ethique*. I disagree with her conclusion. I am convinced that Spinoza's overall discussion in *Ethics* allows one to conclude that, for Spinoza, the infinite mediate mode of

(lower-level individuals) that follows from the nature of extension, and that has the level of complexity necessary to perform the activities of man. The essence of Socrates, or Baruch, or a man existing in act, is a particular, stable *ratio* of motion and rest which has been instantiated through a series of causal processes (during generation),<sup>402</sup> which in turn is expressed in all the causal activities in which Baruch is engaged, from the simplest biological interactions after birth to the complex philosophical and political activities of the adult (and part of larger and more complex organisms such as political bodies).

Both kinds of essences (essence and actual essence) belong, of course, to *natura naturata*, i.e. they are the effects or expressions of the power of God. God is the cause of the essence of man in general, and of the actual particular essence, or the essence of the existing body of Baruch.<sup>403</sup> The similarity principle is respected because God is extension formally (not eminently), and *qua* extension he *contains* all the essences of things. However, as said before, the effects, *qua* modes, are different from God not only in existence, but also in essence, since their essence is not the infinite absolute power that constitutes the power of God. In the case of a

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thought is the idea having as its *ideatum* exactly the *facies totius universi*; in other words, the infinite *facies totius universi* and the idea of it are one and the same infinite mediate mode.

<sup>402</sup> On the relationship of essence as *conatus* and essence of bodies as ratio of motion and rest, see François Zourabichvili, “L’identité individuelle chez Spinoza” in Revault d’Allonnes, M., and Rizk, H. (eds.), *Spinoza: Puissance et ontologie*, and Don Garrett, “Spinoza on individuation,” in *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, Barber and Gracia (eds).

<sup>403</sup> The same argument works for the mind of Baruch.

parent generating the child Baruch, i.e. being Baruch's cause *secundum fieri*, Spinoza rightly points out that the shared essence of man is not caused by the parent, while the existence of the child, which is not shared (if parent and child shared the same existence, the child could not survive the parent, and the parent could not exist prior to the child's birth, which is nonsense), is in fact the partial<sup>404</sup> expression of the actual essence of the parent, and, *qua* such, it is *modally distinct* from it, and therefore *dissimilar*.

This discussion had the goal to show how the dissimilarity principle is not necessarily inconsistent with the similarity principle and the containment principle. Whether the dissimilarity principle is a good philosophical addition to Spinoza's thought is a different matter: personally, I am afraid it is not helpful. However, in order to understand the full import of the dissimilarity principle and to avoid overestimating the problems it may cause, it is important to see it in context. In the case discussed in the Scholium to P17, Spinoza is trying to argue for a difficult and delicate position. He accepts the *nihil ex nihilo* causal axiom, and its consequences, the similarity and the containment causal principles. He takes the containment principle to its extreme, by establishing God as immanent cause of whatever exists. Therefore, whatever exists in finite things must be *in* God; in a sense, it must be God. However, Spinoza is appalled by a possible consequence of the similarity principle: in fact, Spinoza fought tooth and nail the idea that God is similar to humans, or has human-like feelings and emotions, such as mercy, wrath, love (a blunder that he considered the root of much of human unhappiness). However, if the causal containment principle is in place, Spinoza could be read as saying that human emotions must be in God as their cause. The view that they may be eminently contained in God is not open

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<sup>404</sup>A child is the expression, or effect, of both parents, and, as such, expresses only inadequately and partially the essence of each.



to Spinoza because, as I have discussed abundantly, Spinoza rejects the very notion of eminent containment. Hence, Spinoza needs to clarify that the containment principle and the similarity constraint do not exclude significant *differences* between causal relata. In particular, like Descartes before him (as Schmaltz notes), Spinoza points (implicitly) to the distinction between agent and patient, activity and passivity which is a fundamental part of the causal relationship. God, pure activity, is different from everything that is caused by him, in this respect exactly: that what constitutes the causal power of God, what makes God capable of causing infinite and finite things, his infinite *activity*, is what distinguishes him from anything which (extended or thinking, finite or infinite) is caused by him. God *qua* finite mode causing an effect is different from God *qua* the effect because of the power that brought about the effect, which constitutes the actual essence of the cause (not the actual essence of the effect).

In the first chapter, I discussed a tension, in Descartes' thought, between the need to establish that everything is causally dependent on God, and the need to "keep the distance" between God and created things. In other words, a tension between a "causal similarity" requirement, and a "causal dissimilarity" one. Spinoza does not display such tension. However, as we have just seen, a *prima facie* analogous tension is present in his work: while he endorsed an extreme form of monism, he also wanted to avoid a possible misinterpretation of it, which, paradoxically, would bring his God close to the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This misinterpretation (which was popularized in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, article "Spinoza") consists in ascribing to God all the psychological aspects of the human mind, as a consequence of his being *identified* with the human mind. If God is everything, Bayle famously teased, then God is every single thought, emotion, or action, no matter how depraved or filthy. God is both the German army and the Turkish army which are fighting each other. In Bayle's intention, this

shows that Spinoza's system is incoherent; at the very least, if Bayle's reading is correct, Spinoza's metaphysics is dangerously close to the anthropomorphism that Spinoza forcefully criticizes in most of his works. Spinoza sees how the similarity principle could bring critics to ascribe God, the creator of human intellect, a human intellect (the same way Descartes saw the similarity principle could bring one to ascribe extension to God). Hence, his disclaimer stating that not everything that is in the effect is *similar* to its cause, his insistence that the difference lies exactly in what brings the effect into being: i.e. the *power*.

Does this gap between human and divine intellect threaten in any way the univocity principle? My conclusion is that it does not. Spinoza does not say that we should mean different things when we use "intellect" and "will?" to talk about God. Spinoza *denies* that God's essence includes intellect and will, properly defined (intellect and will are *natura naturata*, therefore they do not belong to the essence of God). Univocity is not threatened if Spinoza refuses to ascribe intellect and will to the essence of God, the same way univocity is not threatened by his refusal to ascribe the status of substances to individual existing things.

## 5.9 TOWARD BODIES IN MOTION: A PHYSICS OF EXPRESSION

While Spinoza was very interested in science, and in the mechanical philosophy, he can hardly be called a scientist himself. He did show an understanding of chemistry in his communications with Boyle via Oldenburg,<sup>405</sup> and he tackles with the laws of motion in both his exposition of Descartes and in part II of *Ethics*. However, he criticizes Descartes' mechanical philosophy

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<sup>405</sup> See letters 5-8 and 11-16 between Spinoza and Oldenburg.

exactly for what is one of the assumptions of the mechanical philosophy, i.e. that bodies are inert, or have no intrinsic principle of activity.

While Spinoza accepts a statement of the principle of inertia in E II L3,<sup>406</sup> the principle was grounded on a more general metaphysical principle, which is Spinoza's version of the principle of sufficient reason: for everything that happens, or does not happen, or stops happening, there has to be a *causa sive ratio*. In fact, the demonstration of E II L 3 is based on E I P 28, which states

Every singular thing which is finite and has a determinate existence can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which also is finite and has a determined existence; and again this cause can also neither exist nor produce an effect unless.... And so on to infinity.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> The use of the contemporary term "inertia" should not make us forget that, as Daniel Garber points out, "for Descartes and his contemporaries *inertia* meant quite something else, the tendency bodies have not to persist in their motion, but to come to a stop." Garber uses the term "principle of persistence" (rather than inertia) to avoid this ambiguity in his "Descartes and Spinoza on Persistence and Conatus."

<sup>407</sup> Curley p. 432. Curley's comment to Spinoza's statement of the physical principle of inertia, in a footnote to Cor to E II L3 (page 459) is "Spinoza's version of the principle of inertia seems to be stated in terms which put him in direct opposition to Descartes' doctrine of continuous creation. In *Principles* I, 21, Descartes derived the need for God's continuous conservation from the fact that (the parts of time being independent one another) it does not

God produces some things immediately, i.e. following from his infinite nature. These things are the infinite modes, which are immediate modifications of the attributes. In other words, from God's power expressed through basic and irreducible express-ings (such as extension and thought) immediately follow certain expressions of it, such as (as Spinoza wrote in a letter to Schuller) <sup>408</sup> an absolutely infinite intellect and motion and rest. Much has been said on how to interpret the theory of the infinite modes. In my view, as summarized in the previous section, they are immediate expressions, or effects, of God's power of thinking and producing: the infinite intellect, which contains its most immediate effect, or the totality of the finite modes of thought (the idea having as its ideatum the *facies totius universi*), and motion and rest, which contains its most immediate effect, or the *facies totius universi*, the totality of the finite modes of extension. To repeat, the infinite immediate modes are immediate effects, or expressions, of God's power; they in turn contain, and cause (i.e. express themselves in) the mediate infinite modes, which are the totality of the physical universe and the totality of its representations in

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follow from our existing now that we shall exist at the next moment. Spinoza does not make it quite explicit that it follows from A's being at rest at one time that it will be at rest at a later time since he puts it negatively-viz. nothing else follows." I believe that Curley's comment is based on ascribing Spinoza a concept of extension too close to the Cartesian one. While Spinoza has not stated yet that the individual bodies' essences are their powers, and the doctrine of *conatus*, Curley's perplexity on how can Spinoza state (contrary to Descartes) that what exists at time  $t_0$  will also exist at time  $t_1$  is unjustified, given that Spinoza already stated his 'metaphysical inertia principle' in EI P28.

<sup>408</sup> Ep. 64, p. 299.

God's intellect. All of which, ultimately, is nothing but God's creative power, to use a traditional expression to which Spinoza gave a new meaning.

Within the infinite mediate mode, there is a chain of causes *ad infinitum*, with no beginning and no end, i.e. infinite in both directions. Finite modes do not follow individually from the infinite mediate mode: Spinoza is very clear in stating that the causal chain of finite modes has no beginning. The "vertical" causal chain ends with the infinite mediate mode; the "horizontal" causal chain never begins and never ends, but comes into existence as a totality, as an unchanging, stable process whose inner parts are always changing, aggregating, dissolving, evolving, devolving, coming into being, being destroyed. The succession of finite modes takes place only within this totality; outside, there is no succession (the "*facies totius universi*" never changes.) In a sense, each finite mode is always caused both "vertically" and "horizontally": as I concluded earlier, *there is no real distinction between vertical and horizontal*, since the nature of causation is always the same and all causal activity is immanent.

Each thing is caused, and in turn causes: if essences are powers, it is not conceivable to have an actual essence from which nothing follows (and in fact Spinoza had ruled it out). Things, undisturbed, persevere in their status; changes must be caused either by the thing itself (as in the case of living beings, or more complex systems), or by something external.

Notice Spinoza's explanation of inertia:

... When I suppose that body A, say, is at rest, and do not attend to any other body in motion, I can say nothing about body A save that it is at rest. If afterwards it happens that body A moves, that of course could not have come

about from the fact that it was at rest. For from that nothing could follow but that body A would be at rest<sup>409</sup>.

In my reading, this can be interpreted as saying that the essence of body A expresses nothing but its being at rest, and nothing else: any change in A (say, A starting to move) would be expressions of the causal activity of other bodies.<sup>410</sup> Because motion is not contained in A, A-in-motion (or change in A) can only follow from (or express) the essences of A and another body B whose essence contains (among other things, maybe) the power to move A. Analogously, the subsequent axiom (A 1”), translated in the language of expression, states that whatever happens to a body affected by another body expresses the essences or powers of both bodies.

The discussion becomes clearer once read through the concepts of *adequate* and *inadequate causes* (introduced in E III D 1 and 2.) If one interprets causation as expression of the essence of the cause, the definitions state that an adequate cause is that whose effect can be completely understood through it, *because it is contained in its essence*. So, A at rest at time  $t_0$  is an adequate cause of A’s being at rest at time  $t_1$ ; if A is in motion at  $t_1$ , A’s essence is only an

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<sup>409</sup> Curley 459.

<sup>410</sup> This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Spinoza’s physics. However, there are very good reasons to think that for Spinoza “being at rest” does not mean “being inactive,” a notion that would be incompatible with his doctrine of essence as power. “Being at rest,” rather, involves a power of resisting to external thing’s causal activity: a power that derives from that ratio of motion and rest that constitutes a body’s essence. See Don Garrett, “Spinoza on individuation,” in *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, Barber and Gracia (eds).

inadequate cause of A's being in motion at  $t_1$  (we need a moving body hitting A as co-cause). A's being in motion at  $t_1$  expresses the essence of both A and whatever body B contained in itself the power of setting A in motion. Because the essence is nothing but the power, the effect is an expression of the power, contained in it, and involving it.

The language of causation as expression allows a better understanding of Spinoza's parallelism, as I already argued in the discussion of the causal axioms of EI: to say that we fully understand an effect B through its adequate cause A (or set of causes) is to say that the adequate causes (their ideas) contain their effect (its idea), and to say that knowledge of an effect B involves knowledge of the cause A is to say that B expresses the essence of A, though of course B does not contain it.

The language of Spinoza's physics discussion is probably the reason why interpreters such as Curley were misled into ascribing Spinoza with the so-called inference model of causation. Spinoza here uses "follows from", not "expresses." I can only conjecture a possible reason for this language: the fact that Spinoza had not yet discussed actual essences of finite things as power, and therefore the use of "expression" (insofar only ascribed to God) could have led to misunderstandings. Another possible reason is that the language of logic and geometry conveys the kind of necessity that Spinoza was interested in. Regardless of the reasons why Spinoza failed to use the language of expression in this passage, the use of the geometrical-logical language is no evidence for Spinoza adopting the inference model of causation. The language of expression and the language of inference are perfectly compatible with each other, at least at this level, because both are very strongly tied to the concept of containment. However, as I pointed out in a previous section, the language of inference has the serious shortcoming of failing to convey the nature of Spinoza's concept of essences as powers. Remember how Spinoza

scolded Descartes' concept of extension for lacking exactly the dimension of "expression of power."

While the other authors I discussed (Descartes, Suárez, Herrera) still claimed a genuine causal action on the part of created substances, Spinoza concluded that there are no created substances, there are only finite expressions of God's power, which can affect other finite expressions of God's power. While each expression has its essence, the essence consists in nothing more than its being a finite and conditioned (by other finite modes) bit of God's power. There is no room, in Spinoza, for Suárez's philosophical somersaults, at the end of which one is left wondering what are substances doing exactly (given that God and accidents seem to do all the work).

While Spinoza did not use the language of expression in his short physics treatise (the Axioms, Definitions and Lemmata in E II), or offer any specific discussion on how to construe a science of expression, I hope I have shown in this brief and incomplete analysis that the model of causation that I ascribed Spinoza is consistent with his scientific statements as well as with his metaphysics. Truly Spinoza can say that God causes everything in the same sense in which he causes himself. And because individual modes are nothing but God, a mode's causing another mode is nothing but God causing that mode. Spinoza's commitment to univocity is problematic, but not inconsistent.

## **5.10 CONCLUSION**

This work offered an interpretation of Spinoza's concept of causation. I hope I showed that Spinoza's commitment to univocity was consistently kept.



Spinoza's causation has been interpreted in different ways, most of which draw too heavily on his *ordo geometricum*. The inference model, as Clatterbaugh, Wilson and Mason pointed out, simply does not render the complexities of Spinoza's metaphysical framework, though it is made appealing by Spinoza's frequent use of geometrico-deductive metaphors. As Mason has shown, the metaphor stresses the aspect of metaphysical necessity rather than the aspect of logical deduction. Logical necessity in demonstration is founded on metaphysical necessity, and not vice versa.

The mechanical model of causation, tempting as it is, does not account for the fact that Spinoza characterizes his matter as *active*, i.e. having its own principle of motion, as opposed to being moved by an external cause. While in individual modes changes in motion are caused by other modes, let us remember that the "external" causes are never fully external, that individuation is never absolute, and that for Spinoza each change in a mode is a new expression of one active substance. This is what makes the mechanical model inadequate for Spinoza. Spinoza's appreciation of the mechanical philosophy did not involve an endorsement of a metaphysics based in bodies that are distinct from each other. While in Descartes, Hobbes, Boyle each body is an entity in itself, we know this is not the case in Spinoza.<sup>411</sup> Moreover, the mechanical model would leave causation in the realm of ideas completely unexplained. Even more puzzling would be God's causation. While it would be misleading to characterize

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<sup>411</sup> Thomas Hobbes is an exception, insofar as he problematized individuation in his *On Body*. However, his discussion does not deny that bodies are really distinct from each other; he simply maintained that there can be different criteria for distinctions. Distinction based on matter is as real as distinction based on *conatus*.

Spinoza's physics and metaphysics as a physics or metaphysics of 'forces',<sup>412</sup> it is beyond doubt that it is a metaphysics of activity and power. In traditional mechanical philosophy (such as Descartes', or Boyle's), establishing as only principles matter and motion, there is no room for such forms of metaphysical activity. It is important to remember that Spinoza's definition of extension is simply *not* Descartes'.

For related reasons, the transmission model simply does not apply to causal relations such as the relation between God and modes. There is nothing which is transferred from God's essence to the immediate infinite mode. Immanent causality and transmission (which, the way Zellner describes it, presupposes real separation) cannot go together. While the transmission model is appealing when reading Spinoza's criticism to Boyle's experiments,<sup>413</sup> it simply does not account for all forms of causation in Spinoza's metaphysics. While Spinoza uses the "transference" terminology in speaking of physical phenomena,<sup>414</sup> what he calls the "transference of motion" from an external cause (say, my moving foot) to a stone is later explained in terms of the cause "determining the stone to act that way," i.e. determining a change of state in the stone which is now determined by my foot to move with that specific quantity and direction of motion. In other words, the power in my foot brings about the change in state in the

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<sup>412</sup> Leibniz, much more adept at physical and mathematical studies than Spinoza, will introduce the concept of vis in both his physics and his metaphysics; however, he arguably owed the idea of a living, active substance in which each stage is the product of the previous, active stage to Spinoza.

<sup>413</sup> Letters 6 and 13 to Henry Oldenburg. These were early letters (1661-3).

<sup>414</sup> For example, letter 58 to Schuller.

stone, i.e. (as Spinoza wrote a few lines below) the change in the *conatus* of the stone, which is what determines the stone to begin, and then to persevere in, rolling.

I cannot claim that my reading of Spinoza is problem-free. For example, it may be argued that it does not account for Spinoza's fondness for a mechanical language. However, while Spinoza did occasionally discuss physics in terms of transference of motion, he was a sharp critic of the mechanical philosophy insofar as it conceives of matter as inert and of motion as something that needs to be added from without. His whole discussion of *conatus* is about activity. While it is possible to read in Spinoza's *conatus* a Hobbesian use, this reading is limited and does not account for the presence of *conatus* in non-material contexts. For Hobbes, everything is matter and motion, and *conatus* in psychology is the same as, works the same way as *conatus* in mechanics. However, for Spinoza, it is not possible to read of 'ideal' *conatus* as material. A 'metaphorical' reading of *conatus* does not make much more sense.

Another problem is the Scholium to P17, which I discussed in the previous section. While I hope I showed that it can be interpreted consistently to my discussion of the containment-expression model of causation, it is still somewhat puzzling. For example, given that God is self-caused, how can Spinoza claim that he is different in what he got from his cause, i.e. himself? Also, I am not sure that Spinoza's application of the dissimilarity principle to mode-on-mode causation can be consistently argued for. We have seen that Spinoza's answer to Schuller's query was far from satisfactory, and I think it is inconsistent with the broad claim stated in Sch. to P 17. I suggested that we read Sch. to P17 in the context of Spinoza's preoccupation with "anthropomorphizing" God.

However, a reading of Spinoza's metaphysics as a metaphysics of power and expression accounts for Spinoza's background, for Spinoza's criticism of Descartes, as well as for some

evident influences on Leibniz's thought, such as Leibniz's own use of the concept of expression. My reading of the relation between expression, containment and the principle of plenitude eliminates the need for ascribing to Spinoza different senses of causation. As I argued earlier, while I cannot exhibit any precise statement in which Spinoza commits himself to methodical univocity, it does not seem plausible that Spinoza would not explicitly distinguish his uses of the concept of causation in *Ethics* (if indeed he used it in different ways), when he had been offering such terminological distinctions in *Short Treatise* and *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. It is much more plausible to think that for Spinoza there is only one model of causation, which accounts to his satisfaction for every existing causal relationship. In this chapter I tried to show what that model had to be like in order for Spinoza to use it the way he wanted to use it. I hope I have also shown, though briefly and incompletely, that Spinoza's physics is as well a physics of expression, and that translating the language of inference with the language of expression has the great merit of placing Spinoza's physics closer to his psychology as well as his metaphysics.

To conclude, a few remarks on Spinoza's metaphysical project. I discussed in the beginning of this work some of Spinoza's "pet peeves": the fetters imposed on philosophical thinking, as well on the possibility of human happiness, by religious dogmas. In his 1675 response to Albert Burgh, the former student who tried (in vain) to convert Spinoza to Catholicism, Spinoza wrote

Still, you appear willing to resort to reason, and you ask me 'how I know that my philosophy is the best of those that have ever been taught in this world, have ever been taught, or will ever be taught in the future.' But surely I have far better right to put that question to you. For I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, *but I know that what I understand is the true one*. If you ask me

how I know it, I reply that *I know it in the same way that you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles*. That this suffices no one can deny who has a sound brain and does not dream of unclean spirits who inspire us with false ideas as if they were true.<sup>415</sup>

Spinoza obviously believed that he achieved his goal of building a philosophical system based on self-evident premises that no one ‘in their right mind’ could reject. Among these, I argued, the doctrine of substance as what is ontologically independent, and the causal principles. Did Spinoza’s system fare as well as he obviously thought it did?

Spinoza certainly manages to avoid the “keeping the distance” problem that, as I have shown, plagues so much of Scholastic, Cartesian as well as Jewish philosophies. He does so, however, by giving up traditional ontology and certain concepts that are very much part of a long philosophical tradition, as well as of our common sense experience. Spinoza must, and does, give up the notion that *individuals* exist. Spinoza’s ontology is based not on separate “things” that do stuff, but on expressions of God’s power that exist and are understood only in their relations to infinite other expressions. Because there is nothing more basic than these expressions, or modes, Spinoza’s ontology is no longer an ontology based on things, but rather an ontology based on *processes*. *Activities* are the basic entities. Modes can effectively be thought, in today’s terms, as structured activities that are stable through change for a limited time, until they ‘dissolve’ in their components. Spinoza’s definition of individual bodies, for example, is based on a stable structure (‘ratio’) of motion and rest, where by ‘rest’ he meant resistance, i.e. a form of activity or force, not mere absence of motion.

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<sup>415</sup> Letter 76; page 342.

Does Spinoza offer a coherent theory of individuation of modes? No, if we ask Spinoza to individuate modes absolutely.<sup>416</sup> But, as I explained, this is not what Spinoza wants, or needs to do. He gave up individuating *things*. Does he offer a coherent theory of individuation of modes, or *expressions*? The answer depends on whether we are willing to accept his presupposition that individuation of modes is never absolute, but can only be relative to other modes. In other terms, modes can only be individuated by their position on their causal chain, relative to other modes.<sup>417</sup> If we accept his presupposition, then indeed he offers an account of individuation.

A possible objection, of course, is that if modes are individuated by their position in their causal chain, then it is sort of circular to ascribe causal action to individual modes... that have been individuated by their causal activity. However, this objection is still based on the assumption that modes are something beyond their causal activities. Once we understand that modes are simply the causal activities themselves, or, *processes*, the apparent circularity vanishes: modes are processes individuated in the relationship to other processes, and that is it. Processes or activities, in turn, are not ascribed to modes, because modes are nothing but processes.

In my discussion, I avoided adopting the language of processes in order to avoid confusion, but I believe that Spinoza's ontology is better understood in terms of process ontology

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<sup>416</sup> Even if we accused Spinoza of failure in this respect, he would be in good company: Descartes failed to offer a coherent account of individuation as well.

<sup>417</sup> A similar interpretation is offered in Della Rocca, 1996, though Della Rocca does not ascribe Spinoza anything close to process ontology.

rather than in terms of a traditional things-properties ontology. In a previous chapter, I remarked that the language of “predication” that Spinoza used in *Short Treatise* is absent from *Ethics*, which uses “attributes” and “affections,” equates “essence” with “power” and introduces the concept of “expression” in order to develop a model of efficient causation not plagued by the traditional problems. My suggestion is that Spinoza dropped the language of predication from his ontology precisely because he is no longer thinking of substance as a sublayer of properties, but as pure activity.

Moving on: is Spinoza’s model of causation coherent? Again, it depends on one’s constraints and assumptions. Spinoza’s model leaves no room for causal relata that are individuals, and, as discussed above, understanding Spinoza’s causation in terms of causal relata prior to their causal activities and powers can be confusing. The model certainly fails to offer a coherent account on how cause and effect, as *things*, are related in terms of expression: so, if one requires a coherent account of causation to account for relation between relata that are things, Spinoza is incoherent. Yet, this is not what Spinoza had in mind, and it is unclear to me why would we accuse a philosopher of incoherency for failing to meet philosophical goals he did not have. Spinoza’s world is a world of processes and activities, in which each state brings about the next. It is very easy to understand how Leibniz could have developed his notion of monads as active substances in which each state brings about spontaneously (through its inner laws) the next. Except that in Spinoza this is a description of the whole of existence: nature is nothing but processes bringing up other processes, and composing more and more complex processes. Each state in a process is an *expression*, or causal output, of a previous state. As I argued, Spinoza adopted the core concept of emanation, where the effect is the product of the very nature of the cause. Except that instead of thinking of causes and effects as distinct *things*, one must consider

then as processes being in different states. A state in process X brings up changes in X itself as well as in Y; both changes express the nature of X.

Does Spinoza's model do what Spinoza wanted it to do? Within the given constraints, I believe that it does. It allows Spinoza to offer a consistent metaphysical picture that does not need a transcendent creator, and where there is no room for contingency and indeterminism. In Spinoza's radical naturalism, nature is its own explanation. Whether one is willing to accept this stance or not, it depends on where one stops asking "why?" questions. It is also an open question whether Spinoza explains in a satisfactory way the passage between the one substance and the manifold we experience. As I said, I believe that he does, if one keeps in mind that the manifold is simply a manifold of processes never truly individuated, not a plurality of individual *things*. In this sense, Spinoza did not have Plotinus' or Herrera's problem. If one is not willing to give up the notion of individuation in nature, especially the notion of the self as an individual, then Spinoza's system is not philosophically viable. But this is not the same as saying it is inconsistent.

A final note. As I mentioned earlier, Spinoza's philosophy is not devoid of problems, and there are some I am simply not interested in discussing in this work. One of the difficulties in understanding Spinoza's ontology is the fact that, while Spinoza renounces an ontology of individual things, he still uses a language of "thingness." Modes are spoken of as if they were things. I suggest here we make allowance for two factors. One is the struggle of a very radical thinker in tweaking an existing philosophical lexicon. The other is the struggle with intuitions that may not have been consistently elaborated, pace Spinoza's claim of exclusively writing *ordine geometrico*. One example of the latter is the oscillation between the similarity and the dissimilarity principle I discussed in this chapter. As for the former, while Spinoza's discussion



makes it clear that modes are not individual entities, separable in any *real* way, he still uses a language that reifies them. This language gets in the way of understanding modes as activities and expressions rather than things, even though, if one looks at how Spinoza discusses them, he obviously intended them to be understood as activities rather than things.

Ultimately, Spinoza's philosophy offers a most interesting alternative to the thinking of his time. No philosophical system (before, during or after Spinoza's time) gives the ultimate answer to all questions: so it is useless to fault a system because it fails to meet such unrealistic standards. Rather, it is interesting and useful to ask whether Spinoza offered a valid answer to the problems that plagued his predecessors and contemporaries, and a viable philosophical alternative to transcendence. Spinoza offered a metaphysical framework which avoided these problems (some of which I summarized under the label "keeping the distance"), while at the same time positing new problems and opening new questions. He offered an alternative ontology which, I suggest, still lingers in today's process philosophy debates. While his philosophy is certainly not devoid of problems, or even of inconsistencies, he certainly deserves his place among the greatest philosophers of all times.

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